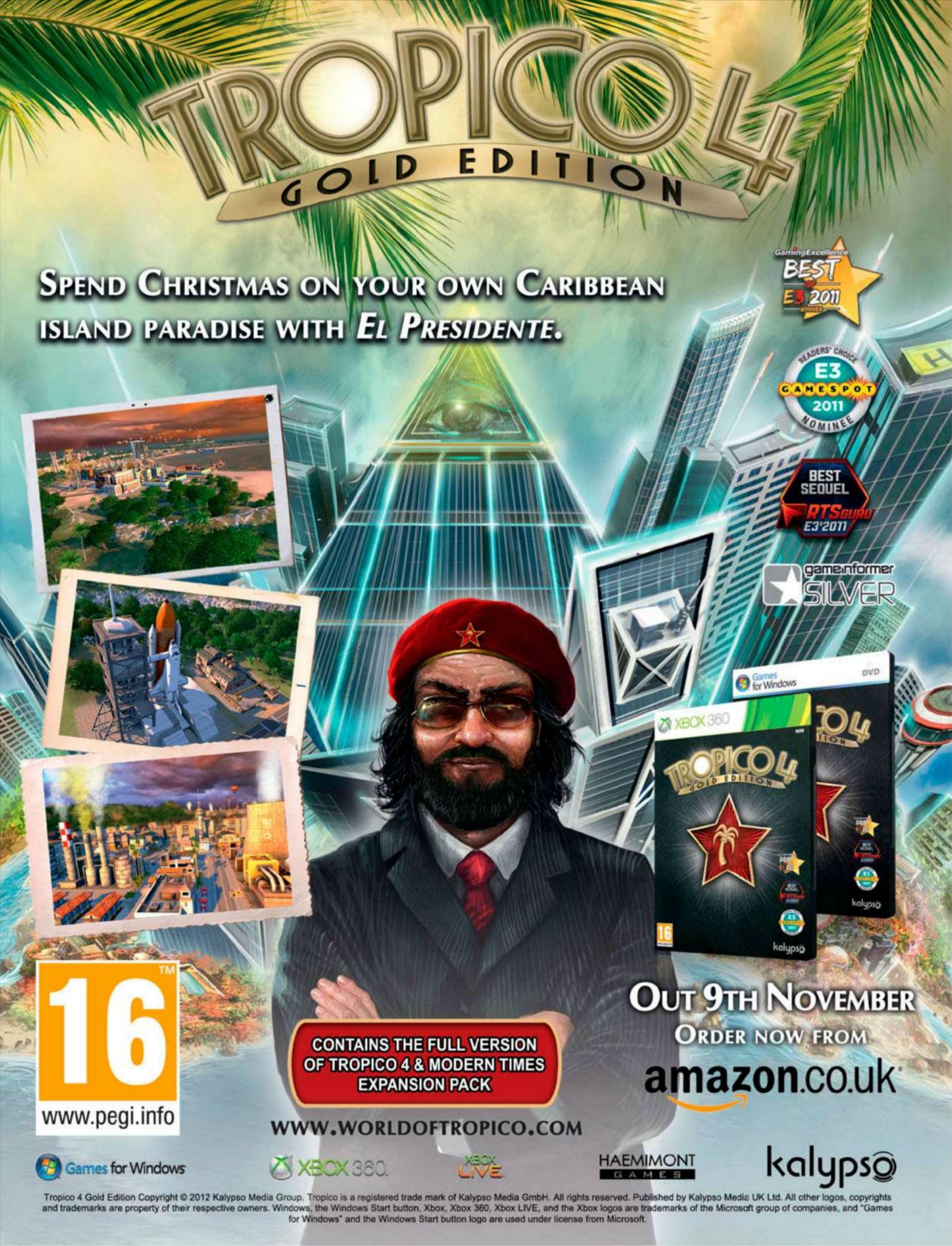


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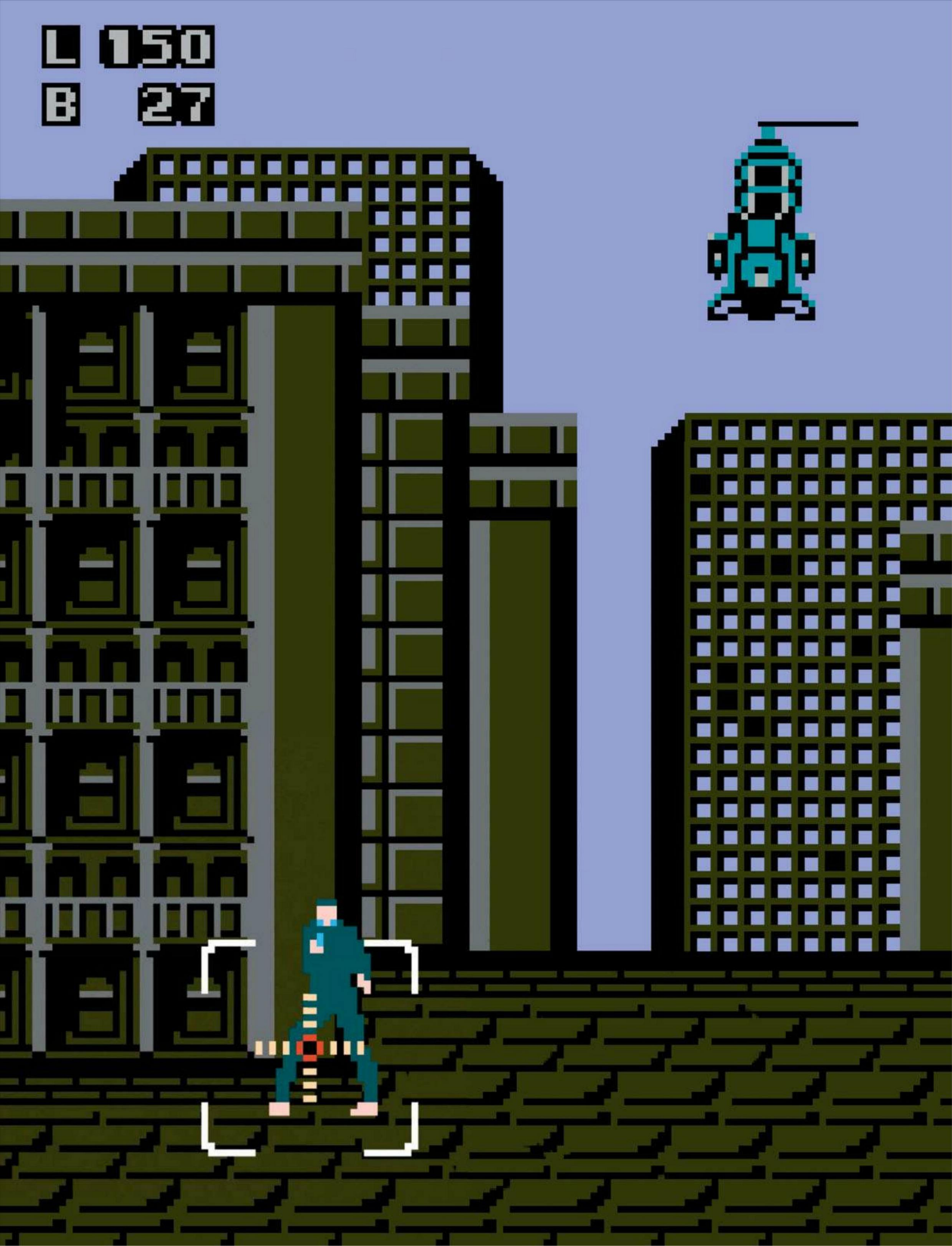
What a lot of grumpy gamers there are at the moment. I blame the weather, personally. The cold brings out the worst in people. At the time of writing, the internet has lit up with concerns over the overall quality of *Resident Evil 6*, queries about how games are reviewed, oh, and of course, the question of whether booth babes should be eliminated or not. These topics will hopefully have all calmed by the time you read this, but I'm sure there will be new grumbles in place.

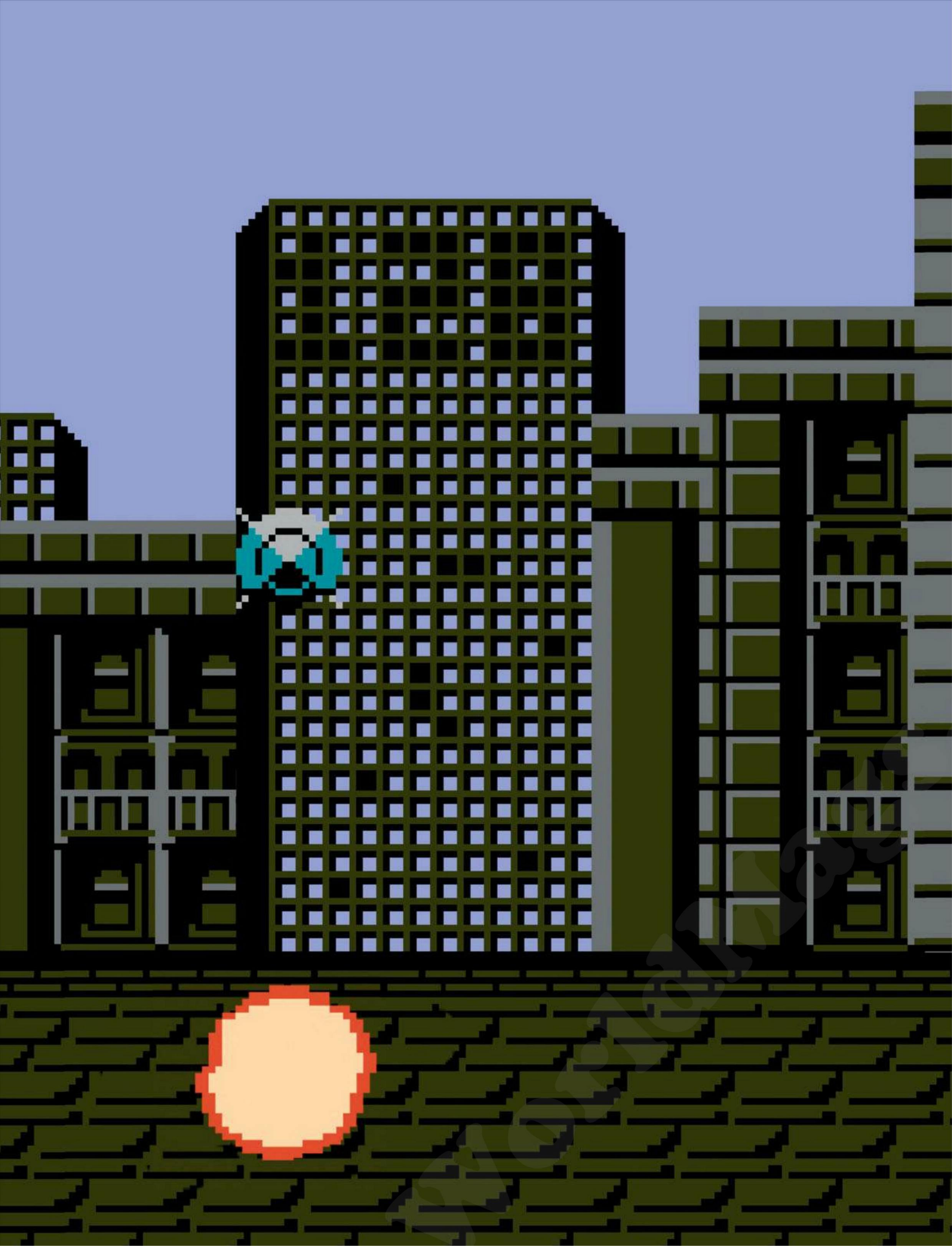
Usually, at this time of year, gamers are elated. All the big hitters are just around the corner and anticipation and hype are at an all-time high. We have *Black Ops II*, *Halo 4*, *Assassin's Creed III*... and that's just the beginning. Turn to page 82 and have a look at all the other games that will be demanding your attention over the coming months. Usually it's the drought after the busy Christmas period that causes despair, but there's no need this year. *DmC: Devil May Cry*, *Tomb Raider*, *BioShock Infinite*... These titles are kicking back, waiting in the wings, ready to impress come next year, and after that, well, next-gen consoles, with any luck. So, chin up, eh?

Enjoy the issue.

Rick Porter
EDITOR IN CHIEF




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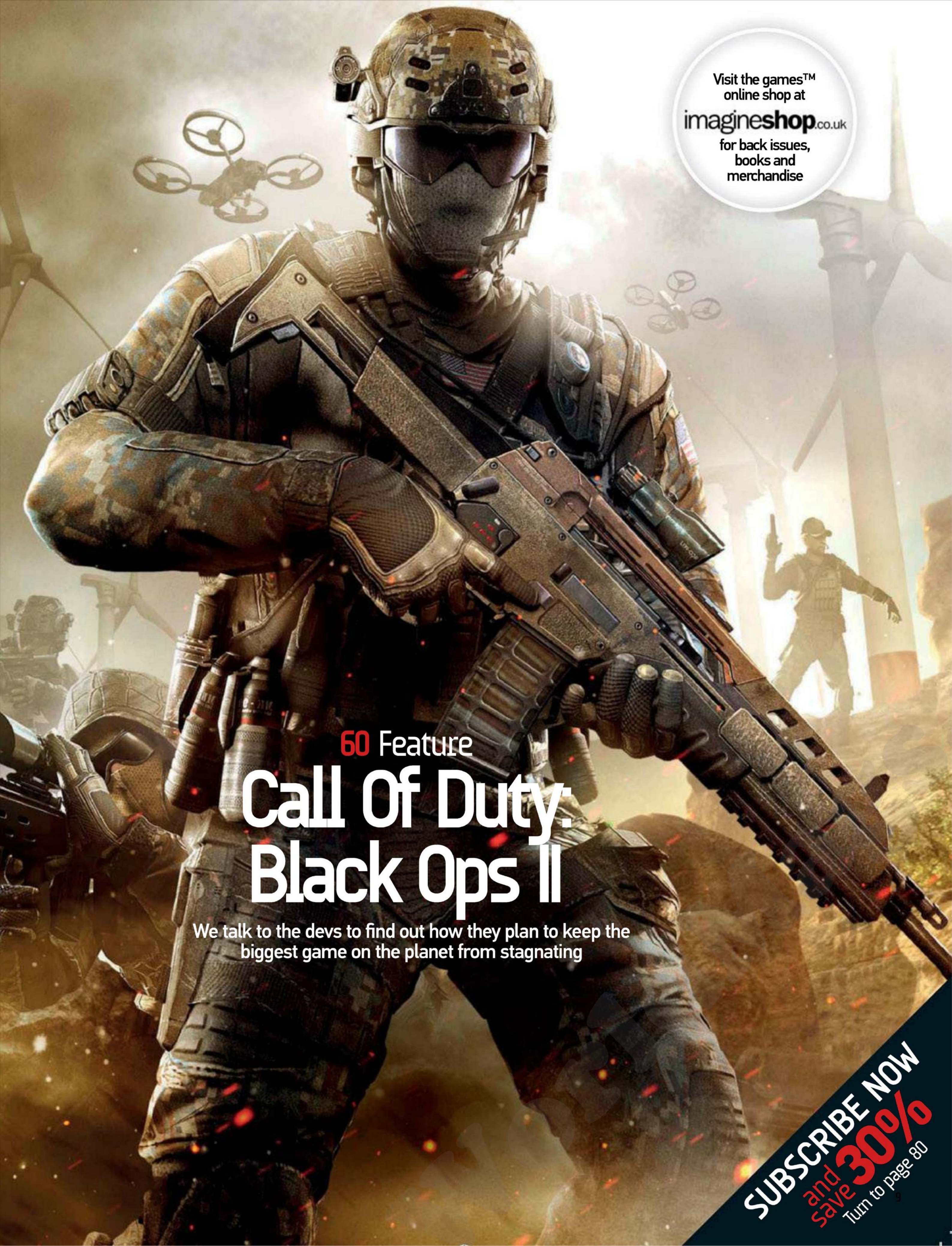

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Wii U goes hardcore

→Nintendo is embracing hardcore gamers more than ever before with the Wii U, but just how significant are Bayonetta 2, Call Of Duty: Black Ops II and Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate to the console's future?

Fifty seconds' worth of teaser trailer during the most recent Nintendo Direct broadcast was enough to spark the internet equivalent of a riot. It began with a crescent moon and a pair of floating feathers. Then, a blaze of bullets fired from a pair of familiar pistol heels. And finally: that logo. It ended with profane insults hurled at Nintendo and incoherent but no less furious death threats aimed at Platinum Games' Hideki Kamiya on Twitter. The announcement that *Bayonetta 2* would be coming to the Wii U and would be exclusive to the console made something of a splash – as it was designed to.

Yet it was just the latest in a series of steps taken by the platform holder to position its device as a console for the core gamer. Indeed, as Nintendo of Europe president Satoru Shibata discussed the unlikely arrival, Americans were witnessing an NYC event where Activision's Eric Hirshberg was an equally surprising guest, there to show off the Wii U version of the behemoth that is *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*. Simultaneously, in Japan, Satoru Iwata was busy confirming that *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* would be available on the Wii U at launch and cross-compatible with the 3DS game.

Capcom's Eastern phenomenon will also be bundled with the console, while Westerners get an equally fearsome challenge in Ubisoft's *Dark Souls*-aping *ZombiU*, which headlines the Wii U's most expensive SKU, arriving alongside a Pro controller that Nintendo fully admits was inspired by the design of Microsoft's exemplary Xbox 360 pad. All in all, it was a convincing show of muscle from a platform holder often accused of pandering too much to the casual market in recent years.

Above The image that sparked a thousand fanboy rants. The reaction may have been as disproportionate as it was angry, but it demonstrates that Nintendo has a way to go to win back support in some quarters of the core market.

In an odd way, *Bayonetta 2* is both the least and the most significant of the major announcements. This is unlikely to be a huge hit for Nintendo; the first game sold just north of a million copies worldwide, and a mere 350,000 units in the US.

DATA STREAM → SONY SUES ACTOR WHO PLAYS KEVIN BUTLER, 'VP OF DERP', FOR ADVERTISING WII IN CAR AD

Contents

Your guide to the essential stories

Above Outside the US, the console's launch date may stifle the chances of *Black Ops II* winning over many converts. Exclusive GamePad features may make Nintendo's format a convincing alternative, but is it too little too late?

Even with Nintendo's marketing might, there's no chance of the weaponised witch becoming the next Professor Layton or Dr Kawashima. And even if those who claimed they wouldn't be pressured into buying a Wii U for this one game ended up relenting, the console isn't going to stand or fall on a title like this.

What is significant is that it's a clear sign that Nintendo realises its precarious current position in the market and the need to attract those who might otherwise be tempted to wait for the next Sony and Microsoft consoles. The shockingly sluggish early sales of the 3DS were humbling for Nintendo, which had perhaps begun to realise how fickle the expanded market could be and that it had a job to do to win back support from the enthusiast crowd that had long supported it. Those who had spent money on *Brain Training* et al as the DS steadily grew into the biggest-selling console ever and a mainstream phenomenon had since moved on to cheap or free smartphone and browser games. The idea of a dedicated gaming device was not something that seemed important to casual players, now that they could play perfectly good games for less than the price of a Twix.

> "It's a clear sign that Nintendo realises its precarious current position in the market and the need to attract core gamers"

THE QUALITY AND depth that Iwata suggests is the hallmark of a handheld designed solely for gaming is simply not a huge concern for most players. Sony might tout the importance of the Vita's twin thumbsticks when it comes to playing console-quality experiences on the move, but this isn't something that means anything outside the industry bubble. In fact, many core players are finding inventive, experimental fare on iOS that is satisfying them as readily as any handheld game. The portable console market isn't dead, but there's a much smaller piece of the pie for Sony and Nintendo to fight over these days. Nintendo understood this, and duly slashed the price of the 3DS while announcing a raft of forthcoming first-party titles aimed at transforming its fortunes by appealing to lapsed Nintendo fans. It's a tactic that seems to be working, and these announcements are evidence enough that the strategy will apply to the Wii U.

Of course, the console is arriving at a time where Wii sales have fallen off a cliff and the traditional retail business model is under its greatest threat. The ongoing global recession, of course, has played a large part in all this – the high cost of games puts them out of impulse-buy range and into the realms of luxury. And even among those who see gaming as their chief hobby, luxuries are the first casualty when money is tight. That's partly why the comparatively cheap home cinema market is on the rise: DVD and Blu-ray sales have this year overtaken videogames, both in sales terms and overall value.

So *Bayonetta 2* is merely part of a portfolio designed to win gamers over. A niche favourite that is popular with the critics is a sensible start, but there will be more where that came from. NOA president Reggie Fils-Aime has already alluded to more third-party exclusives, and indeed there will be two more at launch with the aforementioned *ZombiU* and *Rayman Legends*. Yet while Ubisoft has historically been a strong partner, all signs suggest that Nintendo is



CLUNKY 3DS CIRCLE PAD GETS XL BIG BROTHER, ARRIVING IN JAPAN MID-NOVEMBER



Below *The Wonderful 101* may not be present at launch, but Hideki Kamiya's latest is one of the Wii U's most promising titles. It remains to be seen, however, whether it can win over the console's sceptics.

more likely to invest in Japanese talent, continuing a plan to raise the profile of the Japanese industry that began with the Capcom Five, and continued with support for Eastern mainstays like *Dragon Quest IX* and *Monster Hunter Tri*. With *Bayonetta 2* following the Nintendo-published *The Wonderful 101* (formerly *Project P-100*), there are signs of a promising long-term relationship with Platinum Games. And from a gamer's perspective, there can be few better investments than one of the most respected developers in the industry, even if its cachet is more impressive than its sales.

> "Nintendo is continuing a plan to raise the profile of the Japanese industry that began with the Capcom Five"

As a multiformat title, *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II* might not ostensibly seem quite as crucial to the Wii U's success, but that would be to underestimate the power this brand wields. Though it's unlikely to spark a huge shift in the established online user base on the PlayStation 3 and particularly Xbox 360, it's worth noting that the markedly inferior Wii versions of *World At War* and *Black Ops* both sold more than a million copies. Now that Nintendo is competing on a more even technological footing with Sony and Microsoft, even a minor migration to Nintendo's format would be significant – and with the ability to play multiplayer matches with one player using the TV and the other the GamePad's screen, it's the natural choice for local play. And in the US, where the franchise is at its strongest, the Wii U will launch just five days after *Black Ops II* hits shelves.

Monster Hunter, meanwhile, shows Nintendo is looking to establish a solid user base at home first and foremost. Capcom's series thrust the PSP into the spotlight for a long time, its ad-hoc play encouraging players to gather for local multiplayer sessions, and proving enormously popular in a culture where social gaming is a phenomenon not restricted to the internet. The same is already happening with the 3DS, and the appeal to Japanese gamers of taking their hunter back home to continue their game on their Wii U can't be understated. It's a genuine day one system seller, as appealing to the core gamer demographic as *Mario* is to the wider market, and will ensure long lines and sell-outs across Japan in launch week.

Elsewhere, Nintendo's recent deal with Unity, licensing the third-party engine for internal use and to sell to affiliated developers, is another important step forward. Given the popularity of Unity, particularly among independent developers, it's a sign that Nintendo is willing to open its doors to welcome smaller studios. It also creates the possibility of the eShop becoming a surrogate App Store, not least because Nintendo has noticeably softened on the subjects of free-to-play and microtransactions since Iwata's GDC speech in 2011 where he talked of "preserving the value of games". As Apple eats into its market share, it's not surprising that a businessman as savvy as Nintendo's president would want its download service to offer more serious competition. And with ambitious plans for Miiverse, the console's own social network, it has a unique way to generate buzz among Wii U owners.

Alone, these announcements might not mean a great deal beyond showing that the Wii U isn't going to be starved of core titles. But together, they'll help in establishing a range of software that should convince publishers to make further investment in similar titles. For the time being, Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick is claiming that his company's suite of casual titles are a better fit for the console, but the more core-focused games in the library, the more likely the publisher is to change its tune. Most importantly, it sends a message that the Wii U isn't simply another Wii, a console designed for youngsters and families but which carries little appeal outside that demographic. With the likely launch of new hardware from Microsoft and Sony in 2013, it's crucial that Nintendo makes the most of its head start, and this early show of force suggests the format holder is determined to get off to a flyer.



BRIDGING THE GAP

NINTENDO MIGHT be touting *Nintendo Land* as the console's *Wii Sports* equivalent, but it's clear it's aiming outside the expanded audience, too. If the game was solely targeting casual players, where would the benefit be in including Takamaru's Ninja Castle, based on an old Famicom Disk System release, or an aside themed on Game & Watch title *Octopus*? There's a clear hope that *Nintendo Land* will not only convince people of the Wii U's capabilities for asymmetric multiplayer, and the other possibilities of its controller, but also act as the kind of title that appeals both to casual gamers and Nintendo loyalists. Privately, Nintendo will be hoping it functions as a 'bridge' game that leads newcomers to something more substantial.



Above "You better launch with a *Mario* game," said Reggie Fils-Aime, parroting the demands of Nintendo fans. Though the 2D games might not carry the same allure of a new EAD Tokyo title, *New Super Mario Bros U* is the one guaranteed success of the launch line-up.





Below Smaller developers who can't afford the bigger budgets required to make that technological leap to future consoles will find the Wii U a welcome alternative. The *No More Heroes* of the next generation will more likely be found on Nintendo's new machine.



(OWARE FOUNDERS DEPART)

What next for BioWare?

→ On 18 September 2012, two more visionary talents stepped away from the industry. **games™** looks at the departures of Drs Zeschuk and Muzyka and delves into what it means for them and what could be next for one of the industry's favourite studios.

It's easy to blame EA. Wrong, but easy. Google the news story as it broke and it became immediately obvious that, although the games press has remained apolitical on the subject, the comments from the common man lay the blame squarely at EA's door. But we would argue that this is a story of wider implication, one that the pointing of uninformed fingers neither heals nor elucidates.

Greg Zeschuk's parting words did little to spare fuel to the firebrands. A lost passion for something that once was everything is, after all, an entropy of such great rapidity that it is difficult to avoid laying blame at the door of the most convenient, or most visible, candidate. "After nearly 20 years working at BioWare, I've decided it's time to move on and pursue something new," he said. "This decision isn't without significant pain and regret, but it's also something I know I need to do, for myself and my family. I've reached an unexpected point in my life where I no longer have the passion that I once did for the company, for the games, and for the challenge of creation."

So politically correct were these words, many have since accused them of conveying little beyond a careful navigation of a potential legal minefield. To what extent EA's ownership of the developer plays a part is questionable, the special mentions handed out in particular by Zeschuk to some of EA's senior executives pointing to genuine affection on a personal level. "I'd also like to thank EA for the amazing support we've received in recent years," he said. "Working with John Riccitiello, Frank Gibeau, Peter Moore and the rest of the EA team was a great experience, and their support was essential in us being able to achieve our goals with *Dragon Age*, *Mass Effect* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Thanks to the team at Electronic Arts, we had an amazing run. I've had the great fortune of making a number of lifelong friends within EA that I'll always cherish; happily, I leave this experience with great people to remember it by."

On the one hand, it would seem unlikely, then, that there were any personal grievances, while on the other, you have to feel that people do not simply quit their jobs when content. Perhaps it comes down to the nature of creative people. That by their very nature they challenge assumptions. That they expand the boundaries of what is possible and when they are not able to do so, have the common tendency to swiftly relocate to a position from which they can.

> "I no longer have the passion that I once did for the company, for the games"
> Greg Zeschuk, BioWare co-founder

BIOWARE, LIKE ANY independent developer, was once a perfect dichotomy. It was a brand name, certainly, and it was an umbrella term for the group of creatives who worked under it; a shorthand for an entire cultural ethos. It was a way of working, an attitude, and a summing up of goals striven for. BioWare, of course, was sold in whole to EA back in early October of 2007, and at the time, Ray Muzyka could not have espoused the takeover's benefits any more optimistically. "We are truly excited by John Riccitiello's new vision for EA," he said. "This vision is consistent with BioWare's focus on crafting the highest quality story-driven games in the world. It will enable us to further the careers of the passionate, creative and hard-working teams at BioWare Edmonton and BioWare Austin."

The form of this 'vision' was never shared, but at the time we could almost hear the sighs from BioWare's existing fans. The notion was out there that it was the beginning of the end, citing previous



KEN LEVINE HAS SCRIPTED BIG DADDY DIALOGUE IN PLAYSTATION ALL-STARS. MUST HAVE TAKEN A WHILE

Where to next for the doctors?

After coming to games via medical software, their careers could go anywhere…

Dr Ray Muzyka

Muzyka stated: "I now desire to take on a brand new entrepreneurial challenge. I believe strongly in the power of free enterprise to enable sustainable change, so my next 'chapter' will likely focus on an entirely new industry, something exciting, different and frankly downright scary – investing in and mentoring new entrepreneurs, and more specifically, the field of social/impact investing." We'll wait patiently to find out what that actually means. We're imagining a robed guru right now.

Dr Greg Zeschuk

Zeschuk is less committal about a return to games, not ruling it out. He plans to fill the foreseeable future with his passion for beer: "The main project I will be working on is a web-based show called The Beer Diaries, where I interview notable brewers and showcase their beers. If things go well, I'll work on other beer-related shows, apps and projects. If not, I'll have drunk a lot of tasty beers and may be back in games or even something else completely different. Ultimately, time will tell."

acquisitions by EA such as Origin Systems, Bullfrog and others, which have since led to the dilution, then complete dissolution, of their respected brands.

Over the last few years, the grating of the creative side against objectives of business reality has ostensibly lost us some of gaming's greatest innovators. The problem is proving it. Short of the most outspoken commentators – those who have no fear of legal recourse – the reasoning behind their departures becomes one of reasoned assumption. That there are these occasional outbursts, however, can often tell us all we need to know about the hidden world of legal obligation and contractual clause.

ODDWORLD INHABITANTS BOSS Lorne Lanning is one such voice. Having left the industry six years ago, now back, much of what he has said bears out the theory that the butting of horns between creative and corporate is the unavoidable reality of competing philosophies. In his characteristically uncensored tirade in a recent interview with GamesIndustry.biz, Lanning espoused simply not selling out in the first place.

"If you look at the deals that triple-A developers are in today," Lanning said, "at the deal stage before you even know what titles are coming out from that studio, if it has great success the publisher has the clause to buy that company at the value before the success. If they have a failure, the publisher has the ability to toss them to the kerb. So there's no real winning solution. Just look at what happened to the guys at Infinity Ward. How many billions did that property make? How many lawyers did they have to pay to get their rightful millions?"

We may never know the truth behind the departures of our leading lights. There is, after all, a good chance that Muzyka's assertions that he has "largely personally achieved what I wanted in videogames" is, more or less, the truth. That this is a simple case of itchy feet.

Conspiracy speculators will always say there is more to it, and they may be right. But like any event whose exposure to the outside world is merely what we can see through the keyhole, we have to accept that the door may remain forever closed, and that to point the finger without the facts is pure folly.

Whatever the facts may be, the scepticism as to whether BioWare was any more than just a brand was met head-on in Muzyka's farewell blog, addressing the original staff who remain. "Remember the BioWare Core Values you exemplify," he said. "Remain passionate about your art and craft, and always remember it's your fans who keep you in business. I have great confidence in you, the leadership and teams of tomorrow; I'm humbled by what we accomplished together, and I am certain you will go on to scale new heights in artistry, innovation and quality."





Above The changes between *Mass Effect*, released under Microsoft, and its sequels, which came after the EA acquisition, have fuelled fan questions over BioWare's direction.






Inset Some of *Half-Life*'s more ambitious set pieces really benefit from the enhanced scope and fidelity of the Source engine.

(GORDON'S ALIVE)

Good Science: The Making of Black Mesa

→ It's been in development for the better part of eight years, but Half-Life fan remake Black Mesa has ignited the imagination of the fan community and proved that anything is possible with enough skill and determination. Carlos Montero discusses the project's evolution and regrets, and Half-Life 3



How do you feel, after all these years, now that *Black Mesa* has been released?
Relieved. Excited. Pumped to work on it some more!

Can you explain a little bit of the background of the team?
The majority of our team are hobbyists who do this for fun. A few others and myself are professionals, and there are a few students on the team. We're a pretty ragtag bunch.

What was the inspiration for *Black Mesa*?
Half-Life: Source really sparked a dream in a lot of us to see the beloved original *Half-Life* with the same fidelity and excellence that *Half-Life 2* brought us.

How did the project evolve? Is the final version exactly how you envisioned it?
It evolved pretty extremely. There are a lot of things that were thrown out and redone over and over, throughout the years. The final version is pretty close to how I envisioned it, though, for sure.

How did you ensure that the team remained focused over the years? Have there been any internal struggles?
Yeah, definitely. We had a lot of setbacks, mistakes we made internally and externally, that put a big strain on the team. But ultimately we all believed in the project, and I was able to rally us again and again to get back on board and finish it off right.

Since you've been in development, the engine has gone through some iterations. What challenges did that pose?
We've only switched engines once, to the *Orange Box* (2007) version of the engine. It was extremely painful, and involved us basically starting over from scratch with the codebase. Other than that, tools updates did give us quite a bit of grief. Sometimes tools would just stop working, or things like certain choreography tools only worked on certain versions of Windows. These were pretty difficult to deal with and definitely caused us a lot of frustration at times.

> "We wanted people to experience Half-Life with amazement"
> Carlos Montero, Black Mesa Modification Team

What has been the most challenging aspect of development?
Hitting the quality bar of Valve themselves. We had to continually push ourselves to be critical of our own work and take things further and further. It's been a long learning process, but it's been a great ride as well.

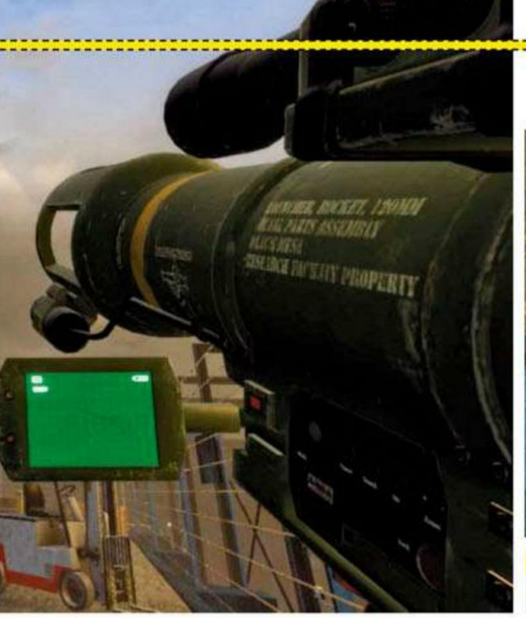
Have you had any response from Valve?
Since we have been Greenlit, Valve is currently working with us to get *Black Mesa* on Steam! We're really excited to be working on that!

You originally planned for a 2009 release. Why such a long delay?
In 2009 we pushed ourselves very hard to reach some unrealistic goals, and in the end we just weren't


Inset Iconic enemies return in *Black Mesa*.









Above Ah, the crowbar. That's one thing *Black Mesa* wouldn't be able to change and still call itself a *Half-Life* game.

happy with what we had. We went back to the drawing board on a few things, and drastically improved the quality of other things. It was a lot of work, but I think everyone understands that it was worth it.

Why do you think it was so anticipated?
Part of it is definitely nostalgia. *Half-Life* had a big impact on a lot of people, and they were excited to feel that impact again. Part of it, I hope, was the quality of our work, and the fact that we could help them feel those things again despite the length of time that has passed and increase in expectations.

What are you going to do next?
We are still actively working on Xen and a multiplayer component of *Black Mesa*.

What did you want to achieve with *Black Mesa* and, now that it's released, do you feel you've successfully done that?
We wanted to help people experience or re-experience *Half-Life* with the same amazement and wonder we felt when we first played it. And yes, I think we've done that, so we are very proud.

In retrospect, would you have done anything differently?
It's easy to say we would not have made the same mistakes, but we only learn as humans by making mistakes. I'm glad we've learned everything we have, and I'm not sure I would have made any different choices.

In your opinion, how does *Black Mesa* compare to the original *Half-Life*?
I believe it holds true to the original, and helps a new generation of players enjoy it.

What do you want to see in *Half-Life 3*?
Something amazing, innovative, and still distinctly *Half-Life* flavoured!



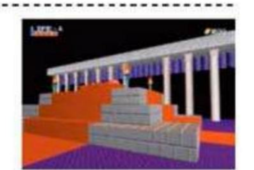
FAN REMAKES

The best fan-developed re-imaginings out there, either in production or released



GOLDENEYE: SOURCE

WHILE ACTIVISION continues to exhaust itself as it endeavours to recapture the essence of Rare's Nintendo 64 classic in a torrent of licensed games, a small, dedicated group of *Half-Life* modders have done just that with a total conversion of *Half-Life 2*. Sharper than an Armani tux, the mod is available to play online now. Check it out at **www.moddb.com/mods/goldeneye-source**



ZELDA II FPS

PASSIONATE *ZELDA* fan Michael A Johnston has transformed the world of Hyrule into an FPS. *Zelda II FPS* isn't a full remake; rather it's a 3D take on the game up until the first boss battle. It boasts some excellent visuals, while maintaining the charm of the NES classic. Play it here: **3dnes.blogspot.co.uk**



SHADOWS OF LYLAT

WHILE ANOTHER *Star Fox* game stalls in development at Nintendo, a mod forum has banded together to create *Shadows Of Lylat* – a fertile next-generation take on Fox McCloud and chums. The game has finally been released and, while a little rough around the edges, Nintendo would do well by taking note.



CHRONO RESURRECTION

THE PASSION project of Nathan Lazur, a self-taught programmer who started working on the game in his senior year of high school, *Chrono Resurrection* was to be an abridged remake of *Chrono Trigger*. Boasting some sumptuous 3D visuals and character models, it wasn't long before Square Enix's lawyers halted production on the game.

EXTRA CREDIT

> GAME

BRENDA BRATHWAITE'S OLD-SCHOOL RPG



Around halfway through its current funding phase, John Romero's partner and *Wizardry* creator Brenda Brathwaite is using Kickstarter to raise $1 million for an old-school role-playing game. id Software and Ion Storm co-founder Tom Hall is also working on the project. If it raises $1.9 million, the pair will split and make an RPG each. The project has already received some high-profile backing from the likes of Notch, Chris Avellone and Rob Pardo.

> WEBSITE

INDIEGAMESTAND.COM

This newly launched website offers gamers the chance to download top indie titles for a price of their choosing. Games are DRM-free and 10 per cent of your money will be given to a charity of the developer's choice. Games on sale rotate every four days. Pay at least $1 and you'll receive keys to unlock the game on Steam, Desura and GOG. $10 will unlock a three-game bundle containing the previous game on offer and whatever the next indie game is too.



> CONSOLE

PS3 SUPER-SLIM

Tired of new consoles like the Wii U? Have no fear. Sony has released the latest PS3 iteration, complete with sleek curves, a sliding disc cover and the inability to stand vertically without aid. Well, it is old. At roughly £185 in the UK, the 12GB flash model is the cheapest, hoping to rival Nintendo's new machine, while a 500GB version comes in at around £250. There will also be a torrent of budget reissues of classic games.

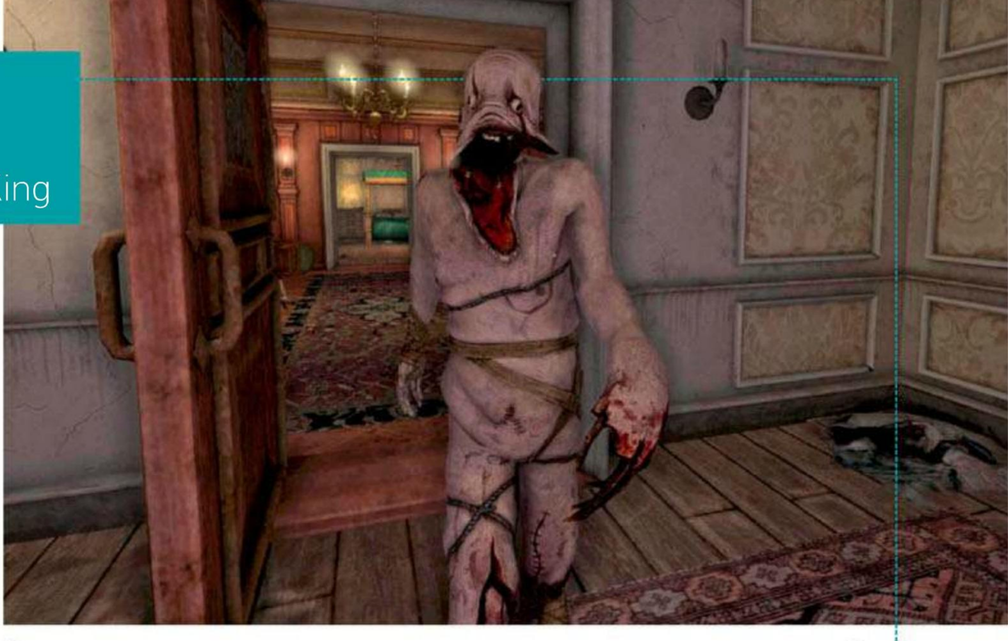




OUYA HAS ATTRACTED 1,000 NEW DEVELOPERS IN THE MONTHS SINCE THE KICKSTARTER ENDED

#TRENDING

with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



Survival horror is dead. Long live survival horror



***Resident Evil 6* is not a survival horror game. Capcom's made it with just about everything else short of a karting section and a bit where you snowboard down the side of a mountain – although it comes really, *really* close to that one.** But horror? Fear? Dread? Nope. Nervy tension when you run out of ammo at higher difficulties, and you might jump when you hear "THAT WAS MINE, ASSHOLE" screamed down your headset when you grab a green herb. But it's not scary. At all.

The merits of *Resident Evil 6* as a game will be debated for some time to come – and, good lord, are those merits being debated right now – but there's no denying that the series itself has changed. *Resident Evil* was a horror game pretending to be action. *Resident Evil 6* is an action game pretending to be horror. It's most obvious in the pacing. There are no diaries to read as you ponder how zombie bites seem to affect spelling and grammar more than anything else. No puzzles to solve. No exploration or backtracking to be done. It's a straight-up action shooter with little to break up the pacing.

This gen has been poor to survival horror fans on consoles. Only *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* on Wii has come close to capturing the fear inspired by the likes of *Forbidden Siren*, *Project Zero* and *Clock Tower*. *Amy* was a technical mess. *Silent Hill: Book Of Memories* on Vita is a dungeon-crawler where you can equip spiral sunglasses. *Resident Evil 6* isn't horror.

Where have survival horror games on consoles gone? The excuse that's always trotted out is publishers are chasing the *Call Of Duty* crowd, hence the shift towards action. In one sense, experience making 3D games has enabled designers to make competent 3D action. A lot of the fear and vulnerability was down to the fact that you were never confident defending yourself. The controls were always a little too clumsy and the camera always a little too awkward for efficient combat, so running away was the preferred option to fighting back.

As engines became more sophisticated and programmers more experienced, strong 3D combat became a realistic option and the trademark vulnerability of the main character began to bleed out of the genre. The rise of FPSs on consoles, in particular, helped stamp out survival horror games, although *Left 4 Dead* is arguably one of the few horror games this gen that's successfully carved out its own unique in-game atmosphere.

> The series itself has changed. Resident Evil was a horror game pretending to be action. Resident Evil 6 is an action game pretending to be horror

The wider problem is arguably on the publisher-developer relationship. Publishers need games they can market, so they justify their investment in said game. How do you market a survival horror game? In the early PlayStation days, creepy magazine adverts and word of mouth would have been enough. Now the marketing battlefront has shifted – viral YouTube videos, social media networks, TV spots and community events are just as likely to dictate a game's success on the shelves. The more numerous marketing channels and increased competition means less time to get the point across. From a publisher's point of view, explosions and gunfire is a much easier sell than someone shuffling into a room, slowly turning on the spot and pushing a stone pillar onto a chessboard to unlock Piece of Griffin Crest A.

And that's what is holding survival horror games back. They've become too niche for retail and so the franchises of old are being forced into new directions by their publishing overlords as they seek to recoup bigger development costs in a challenging economy. Whether it's an action focus, online co-op, multiplayer modes, DLC or even all four, the survival genre is being forced to abandon what made it horror.

Which is presumably why survival horror games are thriving on PC, where the open platform means smaller titles can survive without being bludgeoned into a new direction by the publisher's finances. *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Penumbra: The Black Plague* and *Slender* have shown there is an audience for the genre, and even beyond those known titles, there's a wealth of other games and mods showing survival horror is surprisingly healthy – *Afraid Of Monsters*, *Routine*, *Cry Of Fear* and so on.

It's the perfect genre for small development teams. They don't need to figure out combat mechanics or how to make them work, as combat can be avoided. Polish isn't a necessity as crude, raw visuals can add to the game's appeal. The level design doesn't have to be intricate with no platforming sections or the like required, as the slow, plodding nature is almost necessary to build atmosphere. There are no big set pieces or action sequences. It is a test of simple game design in its rawest form.

The many reaction vids on YouTube show there's still unique power in games to terrify audiences in ways no other medium can, while the many forum threads about *Resident Evil 6* show there's a thirst for old-school survival horror. But the genre has shifted – it's thriving on PC but unlikely to ever flourish again on the boxes under the TV. *Resident Evil 6* has proved that.

So yes, survival horror is dead. Long live survival horror.

Ryan King is editor of





Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z

→ Dead Rising creator Keiji Inafune takes over Ninja Gaiden

It's been two years since *Mega Man* co-creator Keiji Inafune left Capcom to start his own company, on a personal crusade to make Japanese games relevant again. What has he done in that time? Not much. He made a cameo appearance in the dreadful *Hyperdimension Neptunia Mk2*, produced a couple of obscure 3DS games, and revealed the admittedly interesting *Soul Sacrifice* for Vita. It's with the surprise announcement of *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* that Inafune might finally make good on his promise, however. If you're looking for a Japanese series in danger of losing its relevance then you'd struggle to find a better example than *Ninja Gaiden*, while the introduction of zombies combined with Inafune's ability to get the most from Western studios – the development team will be Spark Unlimited – may just be the thing to turn this series around. Oh, and the concept art is excellent.

To watch the teaser for *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z*, visit the games™ website at gamestm.co.uk/?p=8005

COAST TO COAST

with Gray Nicholson



Photo Copyright of U.S. Federal Government

Hail to the chief: Are you a bad enough dude to hook the president?



Bill Clinton recently made an unexpected observation. Speaking in a *Daily Show* interview about the opportunities that open up when, instead of fighting, the government, non-profit and business sectors work together, he gave the example of the hundred computer simulation companies spawned in Orlando from just this sort of arrangement. "Anybody that's ever been, like me, hooked on a videogame," he said, "knows that you've got to have good simulation to keep yourself in a constant state of anxiety." Surprised and delighted laughter followed from host Jon Stewart and the audience, as Bill did a little mime of an almost overwhelmed gamer clutching a controller. Both sides were funny: the idea of a former US president, who's dealt with burdens we can barely imagine, being susceptible to the engineered pressure of a game; and having this truth about games stated so succinctly.

There was a moment of, 'Wait – that is what they do, isn't it? Why do we subject ourselves to that?' As someone treated clinically for anxiety, it's certainly a question that came hurtling to the front of my mind. Why indulge in endless hours of something that provokes – is carefully designed to provoke – anxiety? 'God, I'm running low on these. What's that coming from over there? Why are there so many of these annoying ones? Is that a bloody time limit? I'm going to bump into that. Am I going to fail? Oh no. Loading. Please don't be a boss.'

> "Anybody that's ever been, like me, hooked on a videogame knows you've got to have good simulation to keep yourself in a constant state of anxiety"
> Bill Clinton

I know that if I'm not doing great out here in the real world, I'm even more likely to plough into an epic eight-hour blowout on a game, which the research suggests is absolutely the wrong thing to do. An oft-cited Iowa State University study on 3,000 Malaysian kids found that those who played games most heavily – 30-plus hours per week, deemed "pathological" gamers in the study, for their similarity to other addicts – were more likely to suffer anxiety and depression, among other problems like social phobias and poor schoolwork. If you're a step ahead, as I thought I was, thinking those pathological kids were probably already sad, frightened, bullied outcasts who turned to games for escapism, you should note that the study's authors predicted this uncertainty and tested accordingly. ISU's associate professor of psychology, Douglas Gentile – and I'm sure he is – says kids who began playing more heavily during the two-year study got worse in these areas, and got better when they cut back.

Game type matters. An East Carolina University study seems to contradict ISU's results, until you take into consideration that ECU's was done on casual games specifically. Mood improvements, an average 57 per cent reduction in depression symptoms and 20 per cent less anxiety in patients who were given *Bejeweled*, *Peggle* and *Bookworm Adventures* to play, versus those who were not. (One wonders how depressed the control group was about not being given games.) The director of that uni's psychophysiology lab, Dr Carmen Russoniello, went as far as to say that these "low-cost, readily accessible" games should be made available at "health clinics, community centres, online medical sites, and given out by therapists". This might have been overstated for the benefit of PopCap, which paid for the study.

Clinton's reductionist view of gaming may at least explain my and other cold-sweaters' particular fondness for sandboxing. You get to play a proper big game, not a casual puzzler, but without the pressure or demands. It's okay to watch the sunset from the roof; the building won't explode, mutants won't gobble your ankles. Engage in manageable bite-size chunks of risk and reward by dipping in and out of the mission tree, rather than endure a nerve-fraying bombardment. The right game just might be our therapy instead of our vice.

Gray Nicholson is a former videogames journalist who now resides in America, acknowledging his roots as he sees fit



Cliff Bleszinski quits videogames

On 3 October, Gears Of War and Jazz Jackrabbit creator Cliff Bleszinski made the shock announcement that he was not only leaving Epic Games but the games industry entirely. To mark his 20-year career, we asked games™ readers what they considered the chainsaw-wielding game designer's greatest contribution to gaming…

"I'm not a fan of *Gears* at all, but CliffyB is always an entertaining character. Frankly, it's impressive that people know who he is. There aren't many personalities in the industry who are known as well as the games they create – I guess in that sense he ranks alongside the likes of Miyamoto, Kojima and Molyneux et al, which is probably the biggest accolade a single figure in gaming could hope to achieve. I'm sure he'll be back soon."
Rotek, games™ forum

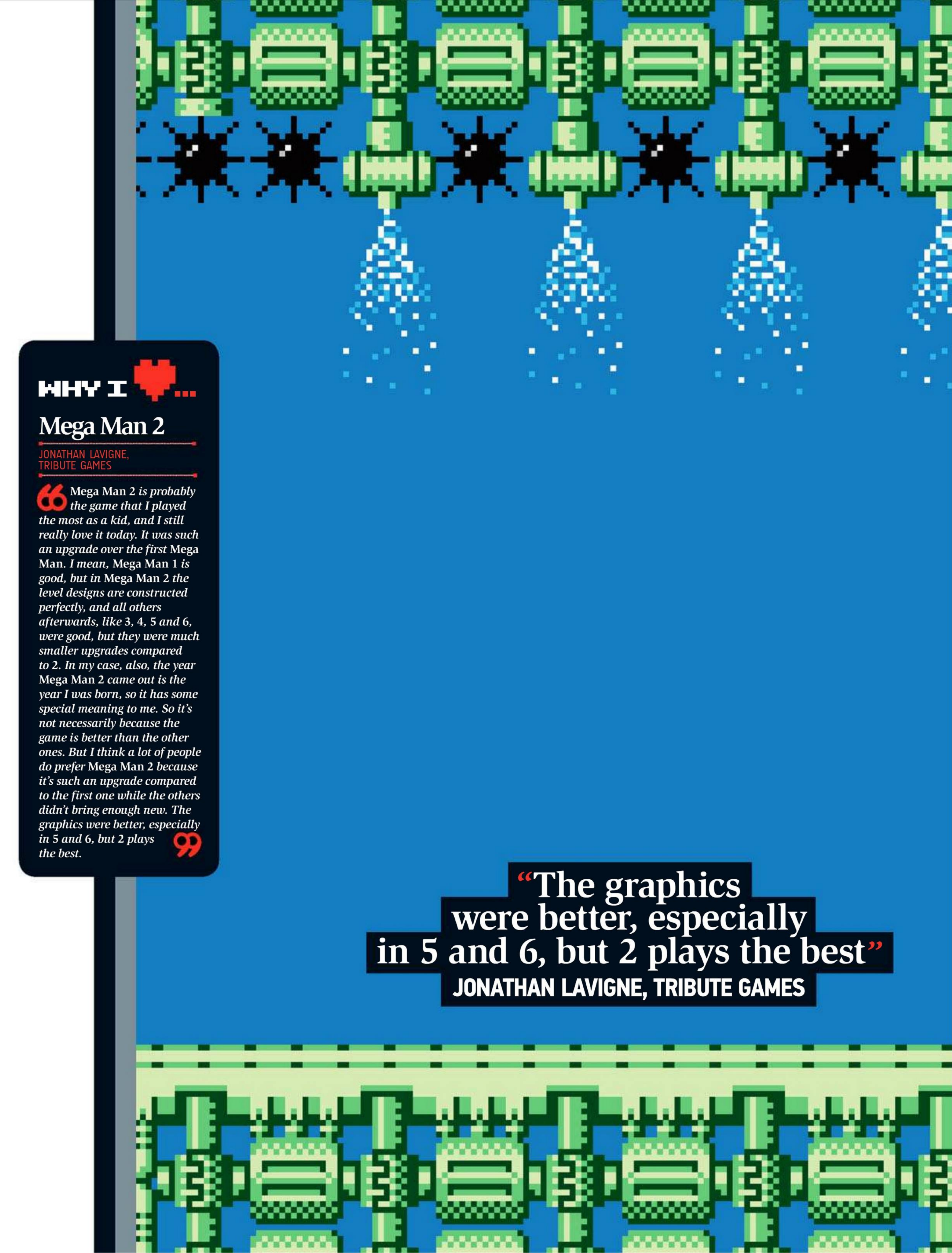
"Gotta be the cover system. Even games like *Resident Evil* are using it now."
@nu_jacques, Twitter

"His personality has made him stand out. He is a recognisable name and face in an industry where most stay behind the scenes."
@spookyview, Twitter

"Active Reload is one of *Gears*' finest pieces of design, sadly ignored as devs thought it was the cover system that made it great."
@schillingc, Twitter

"Dropping a *Wayne's World* reference in a Q&A session."
@gamesasylum, Twitter

"Cliff was committed to making epic games for Epic, setting his standards at a high level. But he also showed that a gamer could make games, and that there was room for personality in an increasingly corporate industry."
Andrew Fisher, Facebook



WHY I ♥...

Mega Man 2

JONATHAN LAVIGNE, TRIBUTE GAMES

“Mega Man 2 *is probably the game that I played the most as a kid, and I still really love it today. It was such an upgrade over the first* Mega Man. *I mean,* Mega Man 1 *is good, but in* Mega Man 2 *the level designs are constructed perfectly, and all others afterwards, like 3, 4, 5 and 6, were good, but they were much smaller upgrades compared to 2. In my case, also, the year* Mega Man 2 *came out is the year I was born, so it has some special meaning to me. So it's not necessarily because the game is better than the other ones. But I think a lot of people do prefer* Mega Man 2 *because it's such an upgrade compared to the first one while the others didn't bring enough new. The graphics were better, especially in 5 and 6, but 2 plays the best.*”

“The graphics were better, especially in 5 and 6, but 2 plays the best”

JONATHAN LAVIGNE, TRIBUTE GAMES





THE ORIGIN OF DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT

A RELATIVELY new studio that has seemingly appeared from nowhere with a triple-A game, Dontnod Entertainment has gone from complete obscurity to one of the most fascinating developers on the planet. "It is a dream come true," says Moris. "I could stop at that. There were five of us with an ambition to do a triple-A game on a console. Some people say we should've started with something small, but the truth is if you do that, fine, if you've got ten years in front of you you'll make it to the middle cycle of next gen. We wanted to really aim for this console cycle and it took us about two years to get there."



Remember Me

CONCEPT No, not an adaptation of that rubbish film starring *Twilight* guy and that pregnant one from *Lost*. It's a sci-fi, *Deux Ex*-like tale where players hunt for memories around 2084 Neo-Paris.

Creative director Jean-Maxime Moris discusses the cerebral sci-fi fable

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: France
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Dontnod Entertainment
Release: May 2013
Players: 1

Cyberpunk Profile

Leather jacket. Fashionable sunglasses. Guns. Lots of guns. The cyberpunk tropes have been well and truly exhausted in just about every medium, including videogames. *Psychic City* set the ball rolling rather appositely in 1984, followed by several notable entries in the sub-genre over the years: *Shadowrun*, *Syndicate*, *System Shock* and, of course, *Deus Ex*.

Cyberpunk History

Deus Ex
2000 [PC]
System Shock 2
1999 [PC]
Shadowrun
1993 [SNES]
Syndicate
1993 [Multi]

High Point

Deus Ex managed to penetrate the zeitgeist with its *Matrix*-like chic and opened up the genre with its branching narratives.

It's a sign how far parochial thinking has diminished the fortunes of Japanese publishers that a Western outlook has become fundamental to their ongoing survival. In the year ahead, Capcom has its eye on broader territories, with several high-profile properties entrusted to Western developers. The most prominent is indisputably Ninja Theory's emofied re-imagining of *Devil May Cry*, but perhaps the most interesting is *Remember Me*.

It's been simmering for a number of years now at French outfit Dontnod Entertainment. At one point it was a Sony first-party IP named *Adrift*, before the publisher's feet turned unfortunately chilly and it shelved the project indefinitely.

"At the beginning it was hard. I mean, there's a lot of prestige of being with Sony," admits creative director and co-founder of Dontnod, Jean-Maxime Moris, "but it allowed us to focus and ultimately reach that deal with Capcom, which I'm more happy about."

> "There were five of us with an ambition to do a triple-A game on a console. It is a dream come true"
> JEAN-MAXIME MORIS DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT

In one short year, Dontnod went from demoing the game for publishers behind closed doors at Gamescom 2011 to returning to the trade show 12 months later and revealing it to the public. "When I was standing in front of the logo at the [Gamescom] Capcom conference, the little child in me was shouting, 'Fuck yeah!'" Moris adds with an amusingly squeaky tone.

/// It was only after the tumultuous working relationship with Sony, which had interfered with the creative process to more closely align the title with its first-party line-up, that Dontnod was able to return to the project's original vision, an opportunity that the studio openly embraced. Set in Paris in the year 2084, a memory storage social network has become the dominant mega-corporation across the world. At the centre of this universe is the amnesiac Nilin, a memory hunter who is set on retrieving her own stolen past and uncovering whatever insidious plot this company has planned.

To date, Dontnod has presented two visually arresting demos of *Remember Me*'s gameplay. One that introduces the notion of 'Memory Remixes' and another that gives a clearer understanding of the game's fundamental gameplay mechanics. But let's return to the first of the two. These instances bookend chapters, not only expanding the narrative but also offering some crucial moral choices for players. In one sequence, Nilin infiltrates the offices of some wealthy philanthropist and soon penetrates his subconscious. Within his mind, she has the opportunity to explore a crucial memory in his life – an argument with his girlfriend. Having replayed the memory twice, making some seemingly inconsequential tweaks, it sets in motion a chain of events that results in a drastically altered conclusion wherein he shoots his partner. When he awakes, he finds himself overwhelmed with grief over this imagined memory and takes his own life.

If we lost you for a moment there, just think *Inception*, except without the part where it didn't make any sense.

"There was also that lingering idea that one idea can change the world – the butterfly effect – that I wanted to have," reveals Moris. "That meant to break into those minds, those memories, and that's where the memory hunter concept was born." It wasn't just the notion of a mind-manipulating dream hunter that was atypical, as introducing a female protagonist in an unknown property is something of a rarity in the industry. But much like how *Remember Me* takes a different approach to cyberpunk, the studio embraced its unusual protagonist.

/// "It was a no-brainer for us for the choice of Nilin – I'm kind of post-rationalising it – but it just felt right," says Moris. "Games about physical augmentation focus on male characters, and to have something different that looks at mankind from a different angle, a more emotional one – and I know that sounds a bit clichéd, but I don't care – a woman made sense."

The second of the two gameplay videos centres on a chase between Nilin and a security chief piloting a VTOL aircraft. It hardly seems fair, but Nilin outfoxes her pursuer by swiftly scaling buildings, darting between cover and using her wrist-mounted device, the Spammer, to disrupt nearby electrical equipment as a distraction. There's one clear distinction between the two sequences, with the Memory Remixes featuring more exploration-heavy level design, as opposed to the rather linear pathways of the chase sequence. We question Moris over which of the two gameplay demos more accurately represents *Remember Me*.

"It's right for you to ask that," he remarks. "[*Remember Me*] is going to be linear. That [first] video you saw was a work-in-progress gameplay video and that was when we were still testing out stuff." With the second demo more reflective of the final game, Moris highlights another gameplay element present in the first that won't make the cut. "The only things that are going out of the game is that [open-world] structure and the stealth around the guards – that was one feature too many for the game," he says.

The list of unconventional design quirks keeps on expanding. While the base combat bears a predictable but not unwelcome similarity to the flow and simplicity of *Assassin's Creed* and the *Arkham* games,

THE ONO INFLUENCE

ONE OF the more unusual revelations from *Remember Me*'s Gamescom announcement was that Yoshinori Ono would be producing the title. When asked about the collaboration, Moris explains the extent of the partnership. "There have been some management changes at Capcom over the past few months and Ono has basically been on board for the last two months," he says. "He's a producer of the title on the Japanese side and he comes to the office once a month, or once every two months, and offers his advice and feedback on the game. He's not involved in daily activities on the game at all."

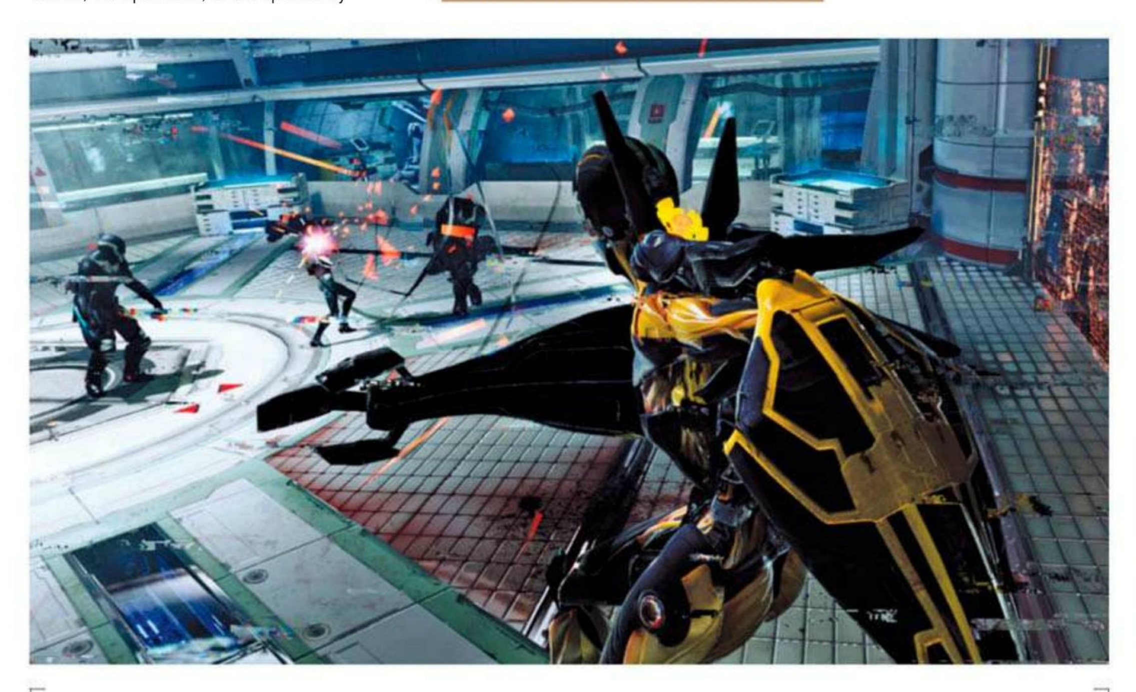
> "We've all uploaded full parts of ourselves onto the network just because it's cool. We don't care if that data can be utilised"
>
> JEAN-MAXIME MORIS DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT





Above: At one point Dontnod implemented a stealth aspect into the gameplay. It was later deemed as excessive and was subsequently removed. Right: Rather than utilising a selection of predetermined combos, *Remember Me* invites players to build their own move set. There's a staggering amount of choice to the feature. Below: Nilin never actually kills any of the enemies she is attacking, rather subduing them with a tactical combination of memory overload and good old-fashioned pugilism.





Above: Nilin will have an extensive range of melee abilities, but she'll also have various powers supplied by her wrist-mounted 'Spammer'. The most impressive move we saw effectively overloaded the enemy's mind with a flood of digital information, causing the foe to fall unconscious.



skirmishes never involve lethal force. Firearms in this future have been outlawed save for a special few, and Nilin instead uses a range of simple melee manoeuvres to neutralise attacking enemies.

"I'm not going to name any references as that's a very dangerous game to play as a developer, but I thank you very much for the references you have mentioned," laughs Moris. "The combat in *Remember Me* at its core is about performing combos, dodges and finishing moves. That's the core of the combat, but there's [the Spammer]. That adds a second layer of depth to the combat system where a wheel of special moves pops up. It allows Nilin to turn the tide of battle. On top of that, there will be a third layer that will bring the depth even further, but I can't talk about it right now. Basically it's with those different levels of depth that we want to reward the casual as well as the hardcore. There is a level of accessibility and fluidity that is the same as the games you mentioned, and then we expand it with our personality and special moves."

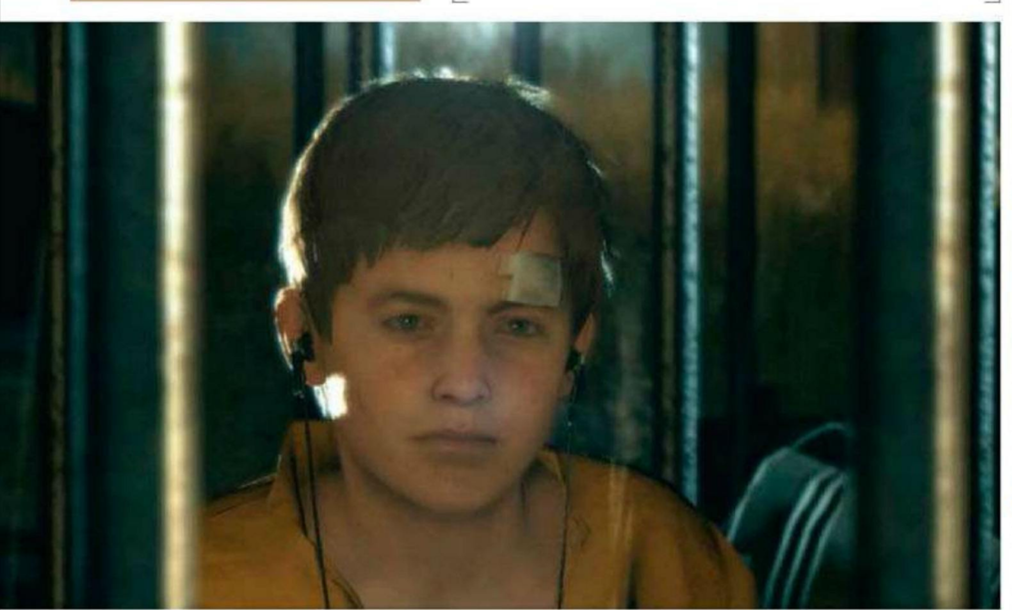
/// Ultimately, though, it's the world itself that has garnered the most eager interest since the unveiling. Like any future dystopia visualised over the past two decades, shades of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* prevail, but there's a distinctly Eastern influence to the surroundings. In Moris's opinion, it's part of Capcom's wider strategy to embrace both cultures. "[Look at] Ninja Theory's *DmC*: that's a very Japanese game but it's done by a British company, which is huge," he enthuses. "I don't know exactly where they'll go with them, but I do think our two companies are definitely part of a new strategy. We've got a new IP with a really Western flavour, but if you look at the game there are elements of Japanese culture that are very apparent."

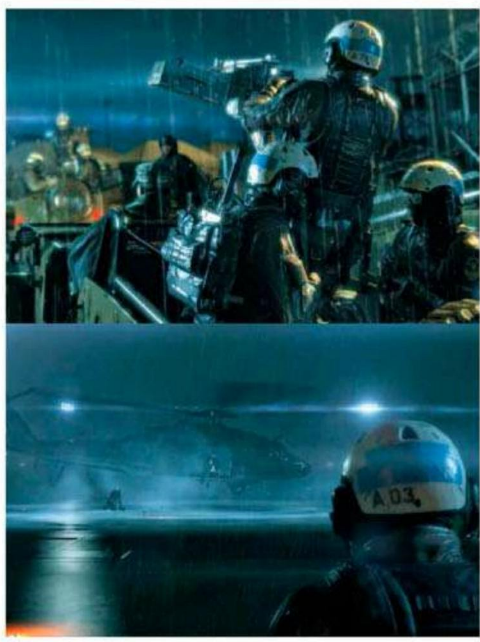
It's a confident gamble for Capcom, but one that can't help but feel dicey as this hardware generation comes to an end. Is Dontnod worried about the impending transition to the next gen? "No we're not, and neither is Capcom, otherwise they wouldn't be doing it," the Frenchman assertively states. "People say it's risky to launch at the end of a cycle because people are starting to spend less because they want to wait until the next one and grow tired of the current generation. Also, from a developer and publisher's point of view, you want to build your franchise early in the cycle and then iterate. Those two things are absolutely true, but at the same time the biggest install base on the current gen is now. You just need to come up with something fresh and innovative enough to get [players] to look at it from a different point of view." And if Moris's point wasn't clear enough, he launches his hands enthusiastically into the air. "There isn't a better time than now!"

SNAKE GETS AROUND

SNAKE ISN'T ALONE in the field this time out, nor is he solely on foot. Taking cues from *Peace Walker*, Big Boss can call in support from a helicopter, either to ferry in supplies or offer the sort of heavy weaponry one might mount on a chopper. Best of all is how players can set their own music for the 'copter to be blaring – and the louder the music, the higher the likelihood of discovery. So opt for *Tubular Bells*, if you want to stay hidden. Snake is also capable of scooting around the environment in a number of vehicles, including a jeep. The necessity for vehicles serves to highlight just how sizeable the levels are likely to be.

■ Above: Snake's apparent ageing was a result of 'rim lighting', which when removed shows he has a full head of bushy brown hair, not grey. Below: Chico returns from *Peace Walker* and brings with him a much glummer outlook. But then, you would be sad, sitting in a cage in the rain with a hole in your chest. We know we would be.





■ Above: Helicopters aren't just for Snake to identify by sound alone – they're used to travel between the separate open-world sections of the game.

Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes

CONCEPT Take *Metal Gear Solid*, open the levels up, give players the chance to choose where they go next and sprinkle on top the new Fox Engine.

Oh, barely comprehensible plotlines and retcons, we've missed you so

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Kojima Productions
Release: TBC 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Kojima Productions is a very rare example of a studio that promotes its talent so heavily that they become the actual name of the company – in this case, the inimitable Hideo Kojima. The studio, formed in 2005, has unsurprisingly been the birthplace of nothing but *Metal Gear* titles, and *Ground Zeroes* does nothing to change this.

Developer History

Metal Gear Solid HD Collection **2012 [360, PS3, Vita]**

Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker **2010 [PSP]**

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots **2008 [PS3]**

Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence **2005 [PS2]**

High Point

Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence took what was already the best game in the series and made it that bit better. It still holds up today, as the standout inclusion in the *HD Collection*.

When Snake asked those watching in a none-too-subtle fashion, "Kept you waiting, huh?" there was a pause. Looking at this grizzled, grey-haired veteran, it was hard to tell exactly who we were meant to be waiting for. Was this Naked Snake – latterly Big Boss – of the *Metal Gear Solid 3* timeframe, or was it his clone/son, Solid Snake, last seen at the end of *Metal Gear Solid 4*? In fact, why did it even matter?

But that's exactly the kind of intrigue a new *Metal Gear Solid* game can throw up, and while it was cleared up pretty quickly – it's Big Boss and the grey hair is actually a result of a graphical lighting technique – it instantly got all the gossip started again. For every cynical dismissal of the *MGS* series and its obsession with exposition-heavy cut-scenes over in-game action, there's a thousand others asking questions, theorising, getting to know the world that Kojima Productions has created and retconned many times more. People love *Metal Gear Solid*, so people get more *Metal Gear Solid* – this time in the shape of *Ground Zeroes*.

The phrase 'open world' has been bandied around when it comes to *Ground Zeroes* and has – again – caused a fair bit of debate. What it means is, far from the *GTA* and *Elder Scrolls* of the world, levels will be much bigger and more open than those encountered in previous *Metal Gear Solid* titles. Players travel from area to area by helicopter – the only point at which there will be any pause for loading to take place – and are free to explore the region they are dropped off in as they see fit.

And thanks to the studio's proprietary Fox Engine, these are some quite spectacular-looking environments to sneak about in. The game so far has been shown off on a PC, though it hasn't yet been confirmed for release on the platform, with specs equivalent to those of a PS3. This is, of course, a roundabout way of claiming the game will look this good on consoles, though we're unlikely to be the only ones remaining sceptical about that one. It doesn't look impossible, especially when you study the detail on show, but it does look a bit too good – a bit too smooth – to truly be a current-gen title, at least in its current form. We're willing to be proven wrong, though.

> "One thing I want to make clear is that Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes is something I'm making myself"
> **HIDEO KOJIMA** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS

/// Other elements of the game bring back that wonderful world of speculation, with all manner of aspects being picked apart. Who is the mysterious scarred man demanding information from Chico? Will we see any multiplayer in the game, especially with KojiPro setting up shop in Los Angeles? Just how much of the claimed 'replayability' will the inclusion of a day/night cycle add? And how much Starsailor will be in this particular game? It's the sort of thing fans love to discuss, and it's why Kojima and his team love to control the flow of information – though we're sure they're eager to show off what the Fox Engine can do.

One thing that has been revealed from day one, however, is that this is not *Metal Gear Solid 5*. Kojima was quick to point out that *Ground Zeroes* will act as a 'prologue' to *MGS5*, which both throws up fears that it might be a bit of a side-project game and seemingly confirms the existence of the fifth entry to the main series. Which, to be fair, is a veritable torrent of information compared to the usual trickle that spills out of Kojima and his studio.

Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes is making all the right noises – and definitely showing an appropriate quantity of shiny things – to get a lot of people very excited. There's always hype with a new *Metal Gear* title and there's similar anticipation when a new engine is being shown off in such a way. Combine the two and you get the hype to end all hype.





Above: The level shown in preview builds is said to be a small one, which gives an idea of the scale we're talking. Right: Speculation has been running rampant as to who this scarred gentleman of the more evil persuasion could be. Volgin from *MGS3*? The Fury of the same game? Psycho Mantis from *MGS*? We'd throw our hat in the corner of Volgin.



IMAGINATIONLAND

AS THE quest involves the boys heading across the entirety of South Park, it's the first time that Parker and Stone have had to actually think about the layout of the town itself. The first locale visited by the new kid is Cartman's vast fortress (his back yard), populated with Clyde's armoury, the 'Pool of Vision', and the stables nurturing one cat. Our time exploring this magnificent stronghold was unfortunately brief, given that the majority of our visit was spent transfixed on the Rock of Insanity while the Ironside music blasted in our ears.

South Park: The Stick Of Truth

CONCEPT The foul-mouthed quartet of fourth-graders from South Park star in a surprisingly traditional RPG experience set across the titular town

Tastier than fishsticks

Chances are the mere fact that you're reading this very sentence means you're already abundantly familiar with South Park and its peculiar populace. We don't need to tell you about the time Cartman fed Scott Tenorman his own parents, or when Fingerbang rocketed to the top of the music charts, or even that moment when the boys took down a legendary griefer named Jenkins in *World Of Warcraft*. You know, as we do, that these are just a few of many notable highlights among years of absurd humour, satire and poignant pop culture references that we've come to adore for over a decade.

And that's also what makes the prospect of *South Park: The Stick Of Truth* so daunting. Never before has a developer managed to channel that tone of the show. However, by all accounts it looks like Obsidian has done just that, transforming it expertly into a game that feels intrinsically linked to its source material.

As Matt Stone so eloquently put it at E3 earlier in the year, Obsidian has worked painstakingly hard to assure that the game retains the "crappy" look of the animated show. But it's Stone and co-creator Trey Parker themselves, overseeing the project, that have guaranteed that every inch of the game world has been imbued with the rich, inimitable humour of the show.

Could this be the *South Park* game to erase all memories of those past atrocities? It's certainly looking that way, but for now we're content to be getting the chance to head down to South Park and meet some friends of ours.



GOOD TIMES WITH WEAPONS

■ COMBAT IS turn-based in a similar vein to *Paper Mario*, with counter-attacks and supers adding an arcade edge to the traditional RPG elements. Cartman – or the Wizard King, as he's referred to in the game – has a rather apposite super, powered by his favourite savoury treat, Cheesy Poofs: he violently defecates over enemies, sending them into nauseated submission.

FREAK STRIKE

■ THERE ARE various enemy types that you'll come across in *The Stick Of Truth*. Goths, hippies and fellow classmates all have different weaponry and powers depending on their designation. Players themselves have the choice of four classes: Cleric, Mage, Fighter and Thief. Rather conspicuously, Obsidian has dropped the planned Jew class from the roster. Well, it wouldn't be *South Park* without some controversy.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
Release: 5 March 2013
Players: 1

South Park Profile

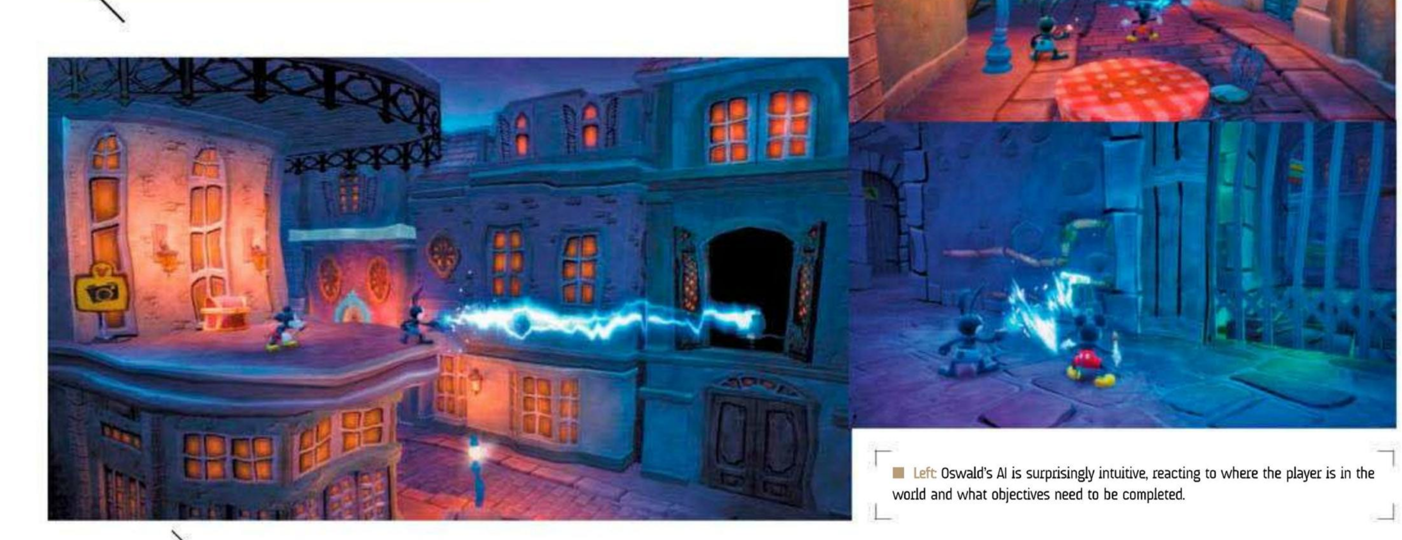
The N64 FPS debut was a foggy misfire, followed by throwaway party game *Chef's Luv Shack* and *Mario Kart* clone *South Park Rally*. It regained some dignity with *South Park Let's Go Tower Defense Play!*, but XBLA platformer *Tenorman's Revenge* reaffirmed how difficult it is adapting the licence.

South Park History

South Park Let's Go Tower Defense Play! **2009 [XBLA]**
South Park Rally **2000 [Multi]**
South Park **1998 [N64]**

High Point

South Park Let's Go Tower Defense Play! nailed the humour and held its own in the challenging genre.



Left: Oswald's AI is surprisingly intuitive, reacting to where the player is in the world and what objectives need to be completed.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Wii, Wii U, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Disney Interactive
Developer: Junction Point
Release: 18 November
Players: 1-2

Mickey Mouse Profile

Mickey's videogame career goes back to 1981, where the epitome of America's wholesomeness/commercialism (delete as applicable) appeared in a series of Game & Watch titles. One Al Lowe point-and-click and a lame NES game later and Disney's mascot headlined the sublime *Castle Of Illusion*. The mouse has yet to do better.

Mickey Mouse History

Epic Mickey **2010 [Wii]**

Kingdom Hearts **2002 [PS2]**

Mickey Mania **1994 [Multi]**

Castle Of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse **1990 [Mega Drive]**

High Point

Castle Of Illusion is without a doubt one of the finest platforming games of the Nineties and rare in so much as it's actually worthy of the licence.

Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two

CONCEPT A co-operative platformer starring Mickey and pal Oswald, featuring musical set pieces. Yes, you read that right.

You're taking the Mickey

Admittedly there's a certain ambivalence surrounding the release of *Epic Mickey 2*, but perhaps unjustifiably so. After all, while the original has its problems – not least that rage-inducing camera – its foremost gameplay promoted the type of joyous platforming and level design that Mickey made a name for himself starring in back in his Nineties videogame heyday.

It's a lineage that, by and large, drives much of the sequel's most impressive chapters, setting simple objectives around a tightly structured environment and inviting fervent exploration. One particular enclosed space tasks Mickey and co-op buddy Oswald with collecting a series of cells to power a train into the next portion of the game. It's a simple enough challenge, but Warren Spector and his team at Junction Point have sprinkled the game with some impressive nuances that offer depth beyond the superficial.

For starters, you can simply power the train with one of the three cells, but that will increase the difficulty of the next section, while players can also change the properties of the river running through this small area of the Wasteland by painting or thinning the scenery surrounding it.

Later, we meet one of the denizens of the Wasteland in some abandoned corner of the world. He warns us that the Blots up ahead have retreated to this isle for peace and shouldn't be disturbed. Mickey has a choice here: either avoid antagonising these creatures or erase them with paint thinner. Whichever the player decides upon will permanently change the way this character interacts with Mickey throughout the game and how other characters perceive him.

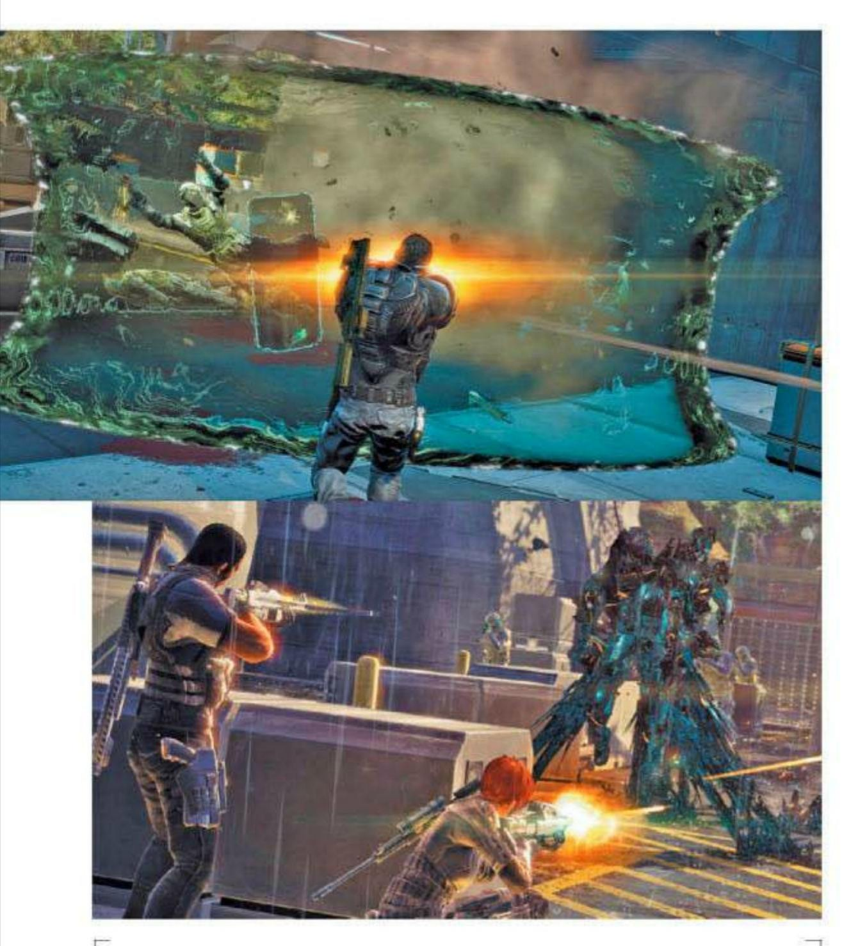
It's not a hugely innovative feature, but it's the subtlety with which it is implemented that impresses. The younger players looking for a more undemanding game can just as easily ignore these progressive elements, while there's a lot to appreciate for those craving something a little less formulaic.

> "The Wii U system has allowed us to provide our fans with a unique gaming experience"
> BILL ROPER DISNEY INTERACTIVE

Add to that the reverence paid to Disney lore, like one boss battle that involves fighting a mechanised Pete's Dragon; musical numbers, although musical exposition is composed in a ham-fisted manner; and 2D platforming stages that tug on the nostalgia strings, and Mickey isn't a slouch in his old age. But it's hard to say whether Spector has done enough to counter the general disinterest for this sequel. Visually, the 360 and PS3 versions haven't progressed far beyond the Wii original, and footage so far has been angled towards the family-friendly tone, rather than the dynamic features we've seen. But this is Mickey back at his most inventive, vibrant and enchanting, and that's worth anyone's time.



Above: Inkpots full of either paint or thinner turn Mickey into a heavy gold statuette or invisible respectively. The latter is used to stealthily evade Blots during an early mission in the story.



■ Above: Just like in *Borderlands 2*, players will need to be in constant communication with each other if they're to utilise their abilities effectively. Below: We're going to go out on a limb here and say that you'll probably have to shoot that orange glowing thing. Just a hunch.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360/PS3
Origin: US
Publisher: EA
Developer: Insomniac Games
Release: March 2013
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Starting out in the early Nineties, Insomniac quickly found success with *Spyro The Dragon*. Sticking with Sony for much of its existence, it went on to develop two key first-party franchises, *Ratchet & Clank* and *Resistance*. *Fuse* is its first multiplatform game.

Developer History

Resistance 3
2011 [PS3]

Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One
2011 [PS3]

Resistance: Fall Of Man
2006 [PS3]

Spyro The Dragon
1998 [PSone]

High Point

Resistance: Fall Of Man was one of the PS3's launch games and still offers some of its best FPS action, though it didn't have the impact of *Spyro* or *Ratchet & Clank*.

Fuse

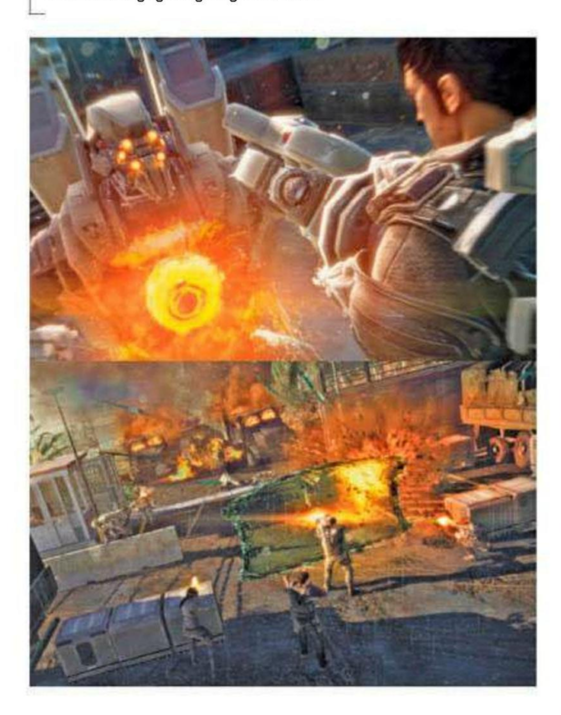
CONCEPT ■ A co-op shooter that gives players an array of alien tech and an evil organisation to use it on.

Stop that, stop that. It's silly

It's always a little disconcerting when a previously promising game disappears from the media spotlight, especially when said game makes such a splash at E3. But that's exactly what happened to *Overstrike*. Insomniac's tongue-in-cheek third-person shooter had many journalists drawing comparisons with Pixar in a flurry of excitement, such was the strength of charactisation and visual quality on display.

That's not to say that *Fuse* is any different. Far from it. When Insomniac and EA re-revealed *Overstrike* as *Fuse*, much of what was teased in the original trailer was present, but there was one notable absence. It might be premature to cite the removal of *Overstrike*'s humorous tone in its transformation as damaging, but what we've seen so far certainly lacks the punch of its initial reveal. Visually, and in terms of gameplay, everything else appears present and correct, but the decision to move in a more 'serious' direction is curious.

Players are asked to pick one of four co-op characters, who form the elite squad of Overstrike 9. After the US government discovers alien technology at a crash site in the Forties, a semi-sentient, smokey substance known as Fuse is experimented on, creating





new weapons. When Fuse is stolen by a rogue military organisation called Raven, the team is sent in to deal with the situation.

It all sounds like it should be played for laughs, but *Fuse*'s art style, though more colourful than your average third-person shooter, plays down the absurdity. Where Insomniac exhibits the confident swagger of a studio unafraid of mixing things up is in *Fuse*'s four-player co-op gameplay.

Each player takes control of a team member and each one brings a specific skill set to battle, as well as their own Fuse-centric weapon. Dalton is the charismatic leader who is able to produce a huge Magshield for players to hide behind. Naya focuses on stealth, with the ability to turn invisible for a short time, as well as use a Warp Rifle. Jacob, the sniper, uses the Arc Shot crossbow that can pin enemies to walls. Finally Izzy, the assault gunner, uses a Shattergun, which freezes enemies in place. Izzy also acts as the medic, dishing out health grenades.

/// If this co-op-based class structure is beginning to sound familiar, it's because Gearbox has recently presented us with a near-perfect version of it in *Borderlands 2*. Where Insomniac is hoping it can build on this template is in its ability to structure missions with a single-player focus on theatrics, as well as ensuring each co-op player is able to find a place on the battlefield. Insomniac's love of crazy weaponry also shines through, and the contrast between conventional and Fuse weaponry is a compelling mix.

Fuse's missions have also hinted at a multiple-level structure, allowing players to split into teams on the fly and approach objectives as they wish, with stealth-focused characters able to sneak behind enemies. It all sounds promising and geared towards players working as a unit, but you'll also be able to play *Fuse* on your own and swap between characters as and when missions require. This brings to mind the inevitable team-mate AI issues, but none of this will matter if *Fuse*'s gameplay can't structure itself to take advantage of four players and the hectic gameplay that inevitably arises.

> "Overstrike presents a unique blend of features that have long been a part of the Insomniac DNA"
> **TED PRICE** INSOMNIAC GAMES

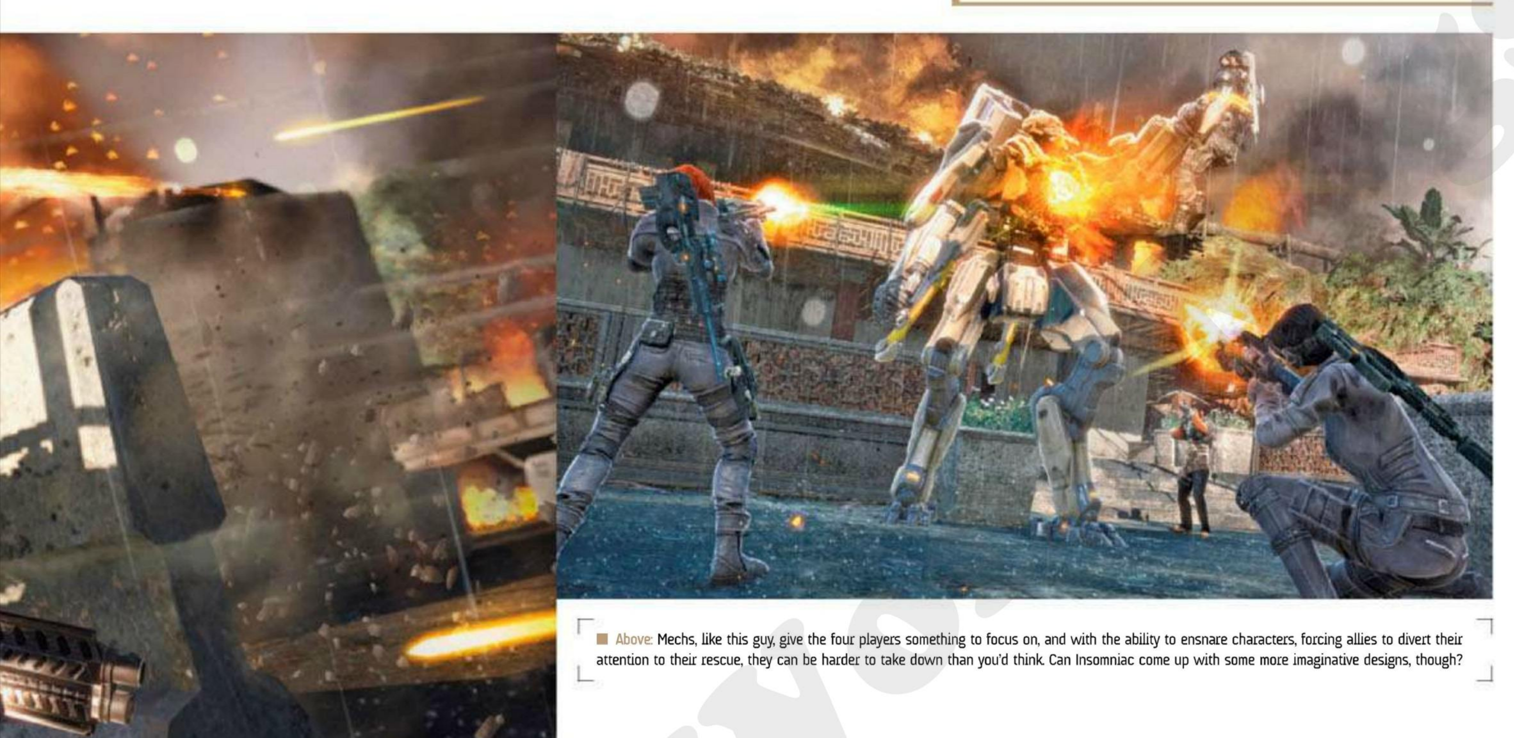
Insomniac has a history here, though. While criticisms can easily be levelled at the *Resistance* series in many areas, its combat takes advantage of its ability to produce awesome weapons that engage players on more than one level. Can the same be said of *Fuse*'s weapons? What about the way players interact together? And that's before we wonder whether or not *Fuse* will be able to produce the goods in the AI department. Its redesign might be disappointing, but there are still plenty of reasons why *Fuse* should top your 'to play after *Borderlands 2*' list.

■ Below: There doesn't seem to be too much of a visual change since its reveal last year. Its focus on a more serious tone does take away from the look, however.



CHOOSE TO FUSE

YOU'LL BE ABLE to play *Fuse* alone using a mechanic called 'Leap' to jump between the characters, but the real joy will come when you add three friends. Using your Fuse weapons in battle, monitoring their usage, and ensuring you make enough kills will fill up the team's Fuse Power. Any team member can then activate what Insomniac is imaginatively calling Fusion mode, which grants the team a Gunzerker-like state to really show Raven who's boss. How much fun this is will come down to Insomniac's enemy design. Early encounters seem dominated by rather boring soldiers, but battles are spiced up with the arrival of a mech that puts the squad through their paces.



■ Above: Mechs, like this guy, give the four players something to focus on, and with the ability to ensnare characters, forcing allies to divert their attention to their rescue, they can be harder to take down than you'd think. Can Insomniac come up with some more imaginative designs, though?

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

HOTLINE MIAMI

Format: Mac, PC
Publisher: Devolver Digital
Developer: Dennaton Games
ETA: Late 2012



CURRENTLY WINNING every indie gaming award going as it tours trade shows and conventions around the world, *Hotline Miami* is starting to look like the game you must love to fit in with the crowd. An Eighties-inspired crime game that transposes modern mechanics onto a retro presentation, it promises to put intense split-second decision-making right at the forefront of its bloody action gameplay.

KINGDOM HEARTS 1.5 HD REMIX

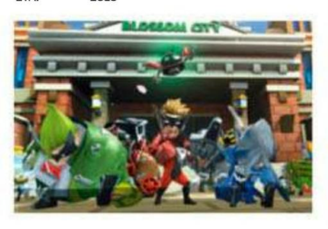
Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



MORE SIGNS that we may have to wait a long time to see *Kingdom Hearts 3*. *Kingdom Hearts 1.5 HD ReMIX* collects the first along with the PS2 remake of the GBA's *Chain Of Memories*, bundles them with the cut-scenes from the DS's *358/2 Days*, and glosses them all up. Great for fans, but don't forget that it leaves *Kingdom Hearts II* and *Birth By Sleep* to be redone before we even get a sniff of part three.

THE WONDERFUL 101

Format: Wii U
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Platinum Games
ETA: 2013



BAYONETTA 2 may be the big news, but we have this to look forward to first. Previously known as *Project P-100*, the number increases by one to incorporate the player, emphasising their role in guiding and manipulating 100 TV superheroes at once. We haven't played this since E3, which is why it's not over the page in our hands-on round-up, but it remains one of the most interesting Wii U games.

CHAOS ON DEPONIA

Format: PC
Publisher: Daedalic Entertainment
Developer: In-house
ETA: Early 2013



ONE OF the best of a glut of German point-and-click adventures, *Deponia*, is getting a sequel next year. So far it looks like a retread of the original, with the hero, Rufus, returned to the planet of trash he escaped from during the first game. With the ridiculously named Goal, the girl he worked hard to woo the first time around, in tow, there's at least potential for some good co-op puzzle mechanics.

DRAGON AGE III: INQUISITION

Format: Multi
Publisher: EA
Developer: BioWare
ETA: 2014



BIOWARE'S FOUNDERS may have left and the *Mass Effect* trilogy drawn to a close, but life goes on at the developer. Unusually, executive producer Mark Darrah has confirmed the existence of *Dragon Age III* in a letter to fans long before the studio intends to show footage, announcing only the subtitle, that a new engine will allow for deeper customisation, and that the game has been in development for two years.

EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 4

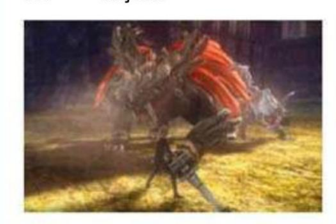
Format: Multi
Publisher: D3Publisher
Developer: Sandlot
ETA: 2013



WHILE THE American-developed *EDF: Armageddon* was a stopgap release, this is the real sequel from original creator Sandlot. Online co-op finally makes its way to the core series, while *EDF2*'s jetpack class, now called Wing Divers, also put in an appearance. A new type of bug, which can weave giant spider webs between skyscrapers, rounds out what is sure to be another great entry in the cult blast-'em-up.

GOD EATER 2

Format: PSP, PS Vita
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Shift
ETA: Early 2013



NAMCO'S POPULAR *Monster Hunter* clone gets an ambitious upgrade next year with a sequel that's bigger in every way: huge environments, multiple large monsters at once, and some of the biggest swords we've seen in a game. Cross-platform play between Vita and PSP is a nice idea, and this is sure to sell well in Japan, where *Monster Hunter* seems to be going Nintendo-only in the near future.

GUNDAM BREAKER

Format: PS3, PS Vita
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



A SORT of *Gundam* crossed with *Toy Soldiers*, the latest game in Namco Bandai's licensed money printer puts you in control of one of the extremely popular plastic scale model Gundams rather than a 'real' giant robot itself. In most of the locations you can't tell the difference, but footage of Gundam models fighting atop a casino table sells the conceit a lot more convincingly.



DELAYED – Soul Sacrifice (Multi)

Keiji Inafune's big comeback game, the four-player horror fighter *Soul Sacrifice*, has been delayed to spring 2013 to implement further improvements. Hopefully that buys you more time to get a Vita.



CANCELLED – NBA Live 13 (Multi)

Realising that it wouldn't have its latest NBA game ready in time for October, EA has decided that rather than launch mid-season, it will sit this year out and bounce back with a fully developed game next year.

PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE AZRAN LEGACIES

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Level-5**
ETA: **2013**



JAPAN'S TRADITION of staying one game ahead in the *Layton* series continues with the announcement of the sixth, and apparently final, instalment. Upping the scale considerably, *Azran Legacies* sees Layton board an airship for a round-the-world puzzling adventure. Quite how he'll get his foxes and chickens on there without eating each other, though, we'll have to wait and see.

ACE ATTORNEY 5

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



PHOENIX WRIGHT returns to the defence attorney's box, following Apollo Justice's turn. He now has the Heart Scope on his side, a device that allows him to see the emotional status of a witness and, this being his 3DS debut, he's brought to life in 3D. If there's one worry, it's that series creator Shu Takumi is too busy on *Professor Layton vs Ace Attorney* to be involved here.

STAN LEE'S VERTICUS

Format: **iOS**
Publisher: **Moonshark**
Developer: **Controlled Chaos Media**
ETA: **Late 2012**



STAN LEE makes the jump from one medium to another with his videogame debut, *Verticus*. Co-designed and narrated by the man himself, it features a plot that would have been outdated on the 2600 and gameplay that's not much different. It's one of those infinite falling games, complete with an upgrade system that screams 'microtransactions'. It'll have to do something unexpected to impress.

PROJECT ETERNITY

Format: **Mac, PC**
Publisher: **Obsidian Entertainment**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



THIS KICKSTARTER-FUNDED project easily sailed past its $1.1 million target. Trading on Obsidian's connection to *Fallout*, *Icewind Dale* and *Planescape: Torment*, it promises more of the interactive storytelling that its team members are known for, but with new ideas that were overlooked when shifting from 2D to 3D RPGs. If nothing else, its success has proved there's still a market for old-school RPGs.

BOX!: OPEN ME

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **PlayStation CAMP**
ETA: **Late 2012**



FROM THE same programme that brought you *Tokyo Jungle* comes another ridiculous idea that just might work. This one is an augmented reality in which two Vita users co-operate to open a box, through relative physical positioning, touch screen and rear-touch manipulation, and brainteaser locks. Move on to this once you've busted Peter Molyneux's *Curiosity* cube open for good.

FIST OF THE NORTH STAR: KEN'S RAGE 2

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Tecmo Koei**
Developer: **Omega Force**
ETA: **February 2013**



THE *DYNASTY WARRIORS* team takes another stab at adapting the cult Eighties manga after the fairly disappointing 2010 attempt. It's business as usual with a host of characters, though a new mechanic that pauses the action to target pinpoint punches promises to bring the action closer to the source material and makes us think this might play a little bit like *Metal Gear Rising*. It won't.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS IS AN IDIOT

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Hardcore Gaming 101**
Developer: **Kurt Kalata**
ETA: **TBA**



AFTER WRITING the encyclopaedic *Guide To Classic Adventures*, Hardcore Gaming 101 curator Kurt Kalata has embarked on development of his own effort called *Christopher Columbus Is An Idiot*. It's a LucasArts-esque adventure that happens to feature some historically themed scenes. Kurt is raising money to pay an artist and musician, so don't expect the final game to look like the above proto-shot.

ETRIAN ODYSSEY IV: LEGENDS OF THE TITAN

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Early 2013**



ATLUS HAS finally confirmed a US release of the fourth game in its hardcore dungeon-crawling RPG series. But with the 3DS region-locked, the game frustratingly remains one step removed from our European grasp. Will a plucky publisher from our side of the Atlantic pick it up, or will we have to buy a US 3DS just to indulge our soft spot for this relentlessly difficult but oh-so-addictive RPG?

Wii U SHOWCASE

JUST AHEAD OF THE Wii U'S 30 NOVEMBER LAUNCH, GAMES™ PLAYED ALL OF THE SYSTEM'S LAUNCH TITLES. HERE ARE SOME OF THE HIGHS AND THE LOWS...

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS U

Also on: **N/A**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **30 November**





THE LATEST demo for *New Super Mario Bros U* shows off Boost Rush, a brand new mode inspired by the recent *New Super Mario Bros 2*'s Coin Rush, with the twist being that the auto-scroll levels get faster and faster the more coins you collect, making the game more difficult the more skilled you are. In the demo we played, two players took control of Mario and Luigi with standard Wii Remotes while a third lent a helping hand on the GamePad by using the stylus to place platforms to save players from a nasty fall, lead them to the top of a flagpole, or give a boost up to a big coin. It wasn't long, however, before we realised how much fun it is to troll the other players by using our powers for evil, placing the platforms to block their path or sabotage a jump, sending them plummeting into a pit. We're a bit nasty like that, and it's nice to see *Mario* indulging those urges.

RAYMAN LEGENDS

Also on: **N/A**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Ubisoft Montpellier**
ETA: **Q1 2013**







WHILE THE asymmetric co-op mode of *New Super Mario Bros U* is similar to *Mario Galaxy 2*'s Co-Star mode in that it lets non-gamers and kids join in with the fun easily, the co-op of *Rayman Legends* requires a lot more skill and, dare we say it, is actually more fun. On the GamePad screen, players take on the role of an independent character and manipulate the environment or interfere with enemies in ways that are essential if Rayman is to survive his journey to the end of the stage. Verbal communication between players in their separate roles is key, making level completion all the more satisfying if you work together. A bonus mode, in which Rayman's jumps form the beat of a popular rock song – in the case of our demo, Ram Jam's *Black Betty* – kept us laughing all the way through thanks to some great comic timing and silly cover vocals.

TOKI TORI 2

Also on: **Android, iOS, Mac, PC**
Publisher: **Two Tribes**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **30 November**



FIRST RELEASED on the Game Boy Color and later remade for the Wii, *Toki Tori* is back for a proper sequel and may prove to be the killer app in the eShop launch line-up. What we expected was more of the same from the puzzle-platformer sequel – more levels, a few new abilities and slightly prettier visuals. But what we got was quite different. Developer Two Tribes has completely reinvented the game for the sequel, throwing away the expanding set of powers found in the first game and replacing them with just two abilities: a stomp and a whistle. In the demo stages, stomping scared other creatures away while whistling attracted them towards you. This sounds simple at first, but as the level design became more complex and the number of creatures and the way they interact with each other increased, a whole world of possibilities opened up. Expect this to be a tricky but fun head-scratcher.

TRINE 2: DIRECTOR'S CUT

Also on: **Mac, PC, PS3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Frozenbyte**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **30 November**





TRINE 2 was originally built for PC gamers, and it really shows. It's a side-scrolling puzzle/combat game with three playable characters that you need to switch between, each with their own array of powers, items and abilities, and it feels as though it's had a score of keyboard buttons crammed onto a console controller. The touch screen of the GamePad helps a little, giving you clear on-screen buttons for a lot of the powers, but this is still a game with a huge learning curve that proved very frustrating during the demo. But then that's partly the attraction. Every situation in *Trine* can be solved in a variety of different ways, some that the developers may not have even anticipated, so there's a lot of fun to be had in experimenting and taking your time. It's not the best of the launch titles, but there's definitely an audience for this and it's good to see Nintendo accommodating them.



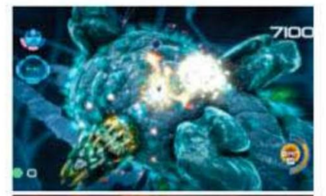
THE Wii U LAUNCH LINE-UP

Here's what you'll be able to buy with your Wii U on 30 November

- **New Super Mario Bros U** [Nintendo]
- **Nintendo Land** [Nintendo]
- **Epic Mickey 2** [Disney]
- **ZombiU** [Ubisoft]
- **Just Dance 4** [Ubisoft]
- **Assassin's Creed III** [Ubisoft]
- **Call Of Duty: Black Ops II** [Activision]
- **FIFA 13** [EA]
- **Mass Effect 3: Special Edition** [EA]
- **Toki Tori 2** [Two Tribes]
- **Trine 2: Director's Cut** [Frozenbyte]
- **Nano Assault Neo** [Shinen]

NANO ASSAULT NEO

Also on: **3DS**
Publisher: **Shin'en**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **30 November**





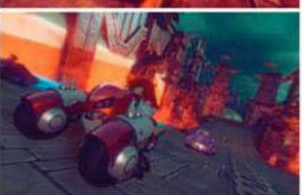


THE 3DS version of this arena shooter went virtually unnoticed when it failed to get a European release. Thankfully, that's being rectified with this expanded Wii U port. With the support of two analogue sticks, *Nano Assault* feels better already, while the ability to play entirely on the GamePad screen or use the touch panel to give custom layouts to your satellite cannons is a nice touch. Overall, though, it's just great to have a game like this at launch. *Nano Assault Neo* turns out to be a great little shooter once you get your hands on it and is a lot like *Super Stardust HD*, except with far superior level design. There were only three games we went back to play more than once during our hands-on time with the Wii U. This was one, and the other two were *Mario* and *Nintendo Land*. *Nano Assault Neo* is certainly in good company there.

SONIC & ALL-STARS RACING TRANSFORMED

Also on: **3DS, PC, PS3, PS Vita, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Sega**
Developer: **Sumo Digital**
ETA: **30 November**







WITHOUT A new *Mario Kart* available from launch, it's easy to assume that Sega's alternative will plug the gap. The first game was decent enough, after all. But if our time with the Wii U version of *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* is anything to go by, those *Mario Kart* fans are going to be very disappointed. There was only one stage available in the demo, and you could only play as Sonic, so there wasn't much to go on, but what really shocked was the appalling frame rate of the game. It felt like we were playing the game through YouTube, at a terrible sub-HD resolution and at a refresh rate so bad it's reminiscent of the very worst 50Hz PAL conversions of the PS2 era. Sumo Digital usually pumps out technically excellent work so we can only assume that the port won't be released until it's in good working order. At least we hope that's the case.

ASSASSIN'S CREED III

Also on: **PC, PS3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Ubisoft Montreal**
ETA: **30 November**







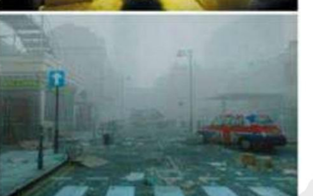
OUR TIME with *Assassin's Creed III* wasn't just our first hands-on play of the Wii U version; it was our first proper taste of the game at all. And we weren't disappointed. The demo was of the ship-to-ship sea battles, a great tactical affair that's so accomplished that it could be a standalone game in its own right. And it really comes to life on the Wii U, the GamePad providing tactical data on its screen and offering convenient ways to manage your battle strategy through touch-screen buttons. More importantly, the game is graphically stunning. It's one of the nicest-looking Wii U games we've seen and sports some amazing water physics that have a tangible effect on gameplay, as well as being really cool. If it weren't arriving a month after the Xbox 360 and PS3 editions, we'd have no hesitation in recommending the Wii U version of *Assassin's Creed III*.

ZOMBIU

Also on: **N/A**
Publisher: **Ubsisoft**
Developer: **Ubisoft Montpellier**
ETA: **30 November**







WE'VE ALWAYS liked *ZombiU*, hailing it as the best game on the Wii U a few issues back, and we're still sticking by that prediction after the latest hands-on. This time we played a different area, the iconic Tower of London, and really felt the brunt of the game's notorious difficulty level. A subtle change to the game sees the 'Take All' option removed from looting sections, which means you now spend longer staring at the GamePad screen as you search for useful equipment on a corpse, therefore leaving you even more open to zombie attack. Even with a friend acting as spotter to warn us of approaching danger, and using our ears like never before to stay alert for zombie groans, we still filled our pants and died a lot. And we loved every minute of it too. *ZombiU*'s ability to scare us and keep us coming back for more is great testament to the potential of the GamePad, and it remains our pick of the launch so far.



2010's Metro 2033 epitomises the term 'sleeper hit'. Far removed from the hyperbole that permeates today's industry, a small team of Ukrainian developers delivered a game that was hugely compelling. Now that it's back with a bolstered team and a grander ambition, we visit 4A Games and find that the post-apocalyptic world of Metro: Last Light is looking better than ever



DEEPER UNDERGROUND

TITLE: Metro: Last Light **FORMAT**: PC, PS3, Xbox 360 **DEVELOPER**: 4A Games **PUBLISHER**: THQ **RELEASE**: Early 2013



Nobody's home. It's around 10am on a balmy October afternoon and games™ has been loitering around *Metro: Last Light* developer 4A Games' Kiev offices for approximately 20 minutes now. Aside from the presence of executive producer Dean Sharpe who shepherded us towards the site, there's nary a sign of the development team. It's even pointed out to us that the group of stray cats that usually reside on the studio's doorstep seem to be conspicuously absent.

Traffic appears to be the culprit – for the team's non-appearance, at least; we're not sure about the cats – but eventually they begin to arrive, trickling in one by one, as they start to fill the empty chairs littered around the serpentine floor plan. Soon after we're whisked along on a tour, each room revealing an excessive quantity of cheap-looking chandeliers gently swaying from the ceiling, resembling Kiev's own ornate metro system, while another pokey space holds various dour character and level design art sprawled across its walls. Where we finally settle down for our presentation, a military getup from *Metro: Last Light*'s live-action short film spin-off, *Enter The Metro*, hangs forlorn in one corner.

To many, these superficial studio embellishments may seem exactly that: superficial. But other seemingly throwaway colourful artefacts decorate the studio, each representative of 4A Games' rags-to-riches success. It's a small, intimate outfit located in the far reaches of the arse-end of nowhere, but the reason for its success is obvious: the devil is in the details.

"What perfectly encapsulates it for me," says studio communications lead and ostensible English-speaking mouthpiece Huw Beynon, discussing the reaction to *Metro 2033*, "is what someone on a fan forums said, 'What I love about *Metro* is all the pointless detail.' And I think the next person came in and said, 'Detail is never pointless.'"

A high level of detail that permeates the post-apocalyptic vision of Russia made the events of *Metro 2033* a tangible enterprise. The pockets of humanity surviving underground each had their own tales to tell, their own little societies, the world mapped acutely on real-life landmarks and the tunnels burrowed underneath them, all matched with a pervading sense that, in some abstract way, this could very well be a bleak reality.

When creative director Andrew Prokhorov eventually enters the room, he's exuding a quiet confidence as the team busy themselves prepping the PC build they're about to boot up. "After the first game, we got feedback that sometimes players find themselves thinking they are not playing the game, but living the life of Artyom," he explains with a thick Eastern European accent. "That was only sometimes. With *Metro: Last Light* we want this to be a permanent feeling. We want players to believe that they are in the game and raise that believability level. We put a lot of effort into small, minor things that people might not even notice, and lots of effort spent on this makes the world much more believable."

Improvements come in many forms. There are enhancements to the core engines that improve AI behavioural patterns and accommodate an influx of mechanics and animations, while also buffing the visuals rather splendidly to boot. But it's hard to get a sense of how all these pieces slot together, and how closely 4A's investment transposes into the player's experience.

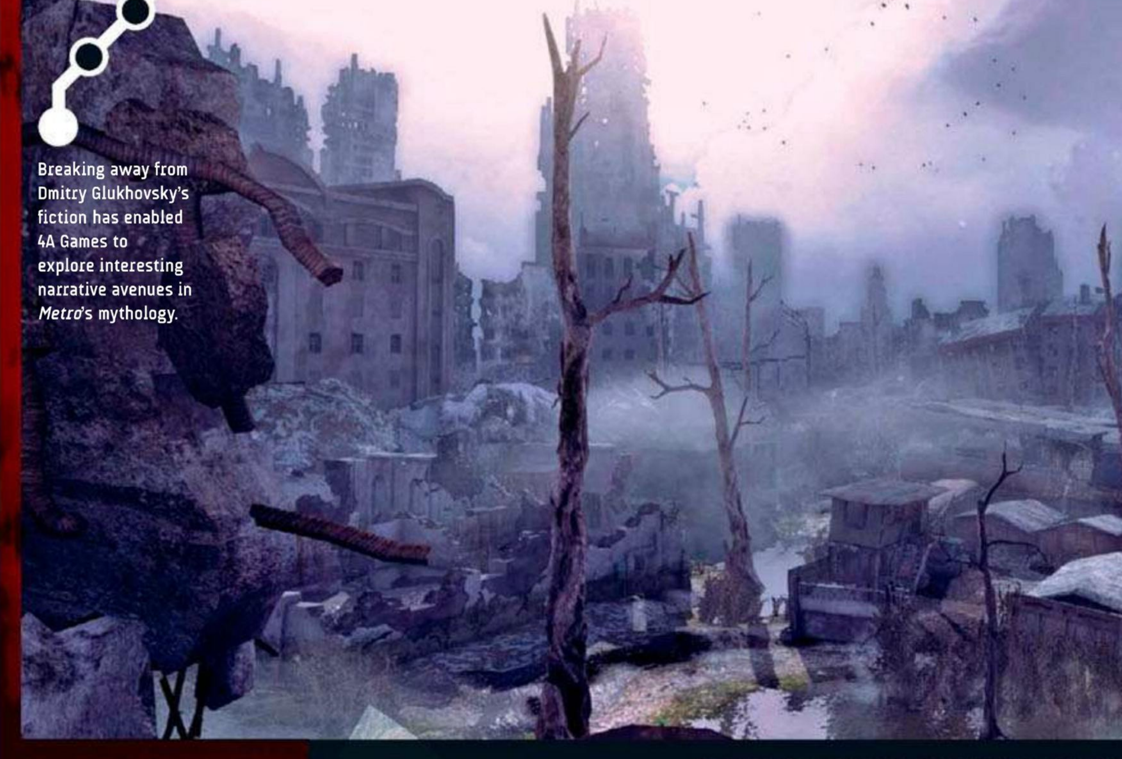


Exploring one of *Last Light*'s new station cities located underneath Moscow's celebrated Bolshoi Theatre, we get our first look at how the player will be interacting with the world. Upon arrival, we're greeted by some intoxicated vagabond, stumbling towards a pig pen that another native is busy scrubbing. Elsewhere, an old man is advertising a burlesque show, while some children share shadow puppets over a flickering lamp. We arrive at the aforementioned burlesque performance and spend a few moments watching the dancers jiggle and cavort to the can-can. However, there's an unexpected heckler, as executive producer Dean Sharpe has a complaint: as it transpires, the team's tardiness this morning isn't solely to blame on the traffic, as the artists stayed late to add digital underwear to the previously bare-chested ladies in the few hours after Sharpe left the office, unbeknownst to him.

"We talked a lot with the team about how Western teams make games and how we are doing it," says Prokhorov. "Very soon you're seeing prototypes, more prototypes, which we polish and stretch. In each level there is something new, something unique, new gameplay. As a result, the final version of the game will not be ready until the night before."

The droll remark raises some chuckles through the room, while Sharpe retreats into his palms, exclaiming, "It's driving me nuts…" But it's all part of the laid-back attitude of 4A. "Our producer and other guys at THQ are like, 'Oh my god!'" Prokhorov jokes, mocking panic. "But we're relaxed about everything."

The studio has earned its self-assurance. Founded by Prokhorov alongside other former employees of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* developer GSC Game World, 4A Games was battling against the tide with *Metro 2033*, as the team of 50 struggled with hardware – "One console was a big deal for us and we decided not to separate our small forces," says Prokhorov on the cancellation of *Metro 2033*'s PlayStation 3 port – and resource limitations. Despite such adversity, *Metro 2033* remains a unique prospect in the first-person shooter genre, built on a lived-in, character-filled universe that owes a debt to the source material, Dmitry Glukhovsky's novel of the same name.



Breaking away from Dmitry Glukhovsky's fiction has enabled 4A Games to explore interesting narrative avenues in *Metro*'s mythology.

"IN EACH LEVEL THERE IS SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING UNIQUE, NEW GAMEPLAY. AS A RESULT, THE FINAL VERSION OF THE GAME WILL NOT BE READY UNTIL THE NIGHT BEFORE"

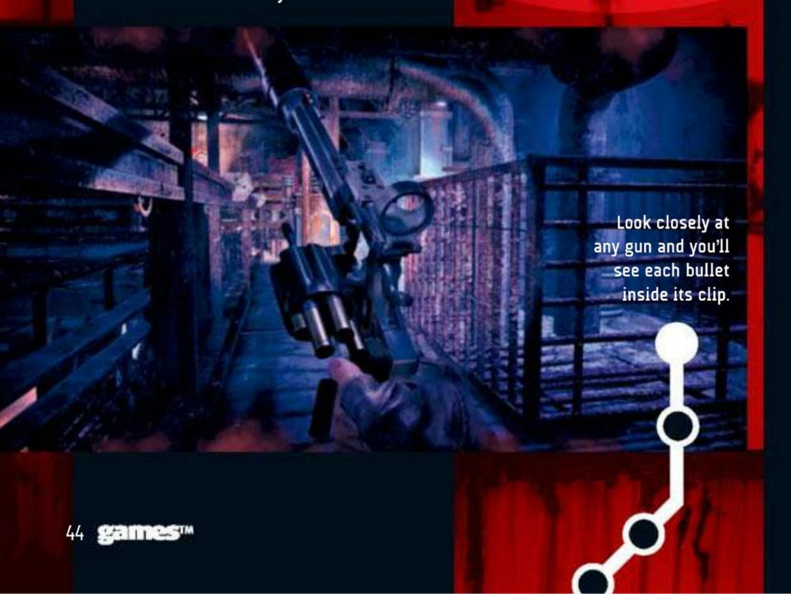


As the story begins one year after the events of *Metro 2033*, Artyom must deal with the ramifications and moral anguish resulting from the decision he made to eradicate perhaps mankind's greatest hope, the Dark Ones, at the end of *Last Light*'s predecessor. Deciding to deviate from the novel's own sequel, *Metro 2034*, the original storyline has prompted a unique collaboration between the studio and the author.

"We work very closely," Prokhorov states. "From the beginning, we thought about using his next book, but it was quite different, with four main characters. From a gameplay point of view, it would be like *Left 4 Dead*, and that's not our field. We decided it would be more interesting for people to know what happened after. We took three or four months to create a scenario with Dmitry. We worked with that from a gameplay point of view and we sent it back and he changed it."

While Glukhovsky has been open to other creative adaptations of his fiction, having recently sanctioned a couple of new books, one written by a British author and another by an Italian, he was resolute that 4A should ignore the alternate 'happy' ending of the first game. "Dmitry was very insistent that we take the essentially canon ending because that is what happens to Artyom in the book," explains Beynon. "And that starting point, that position, that sense of guilt over what he's done, are psychologically a very interesting starting point for the character."

It raises the question as to the point of *Metro 2033*'s alternate ending if the developer never intended to pursue that storyline. "The alternate ending



Look closely at any gun and you'll see each bullet inside its clip.





that you can potentially unlock in *Metro 2033* is almost this beautiful vision of what could have been," says Beynon. "That would close the story, and the fate of mankind and the Metro would go off in a completely different direction. The game wouldn't even be possible from that ending. So we offered that player, who maybe understood the game perhaps a little more deeply, this glimpse of what could have been. *Metro: Last Light* yanks you back into, I think, a much more pessimistic but arguably a much more realistic take on human behaviour."

Beynon continues to discuss the impact of the game in the ensuing years since release, highlighting critical essays written that analyse the subtle moral choices that underline the routine mechanics. "I think what you see in other games is this idea of

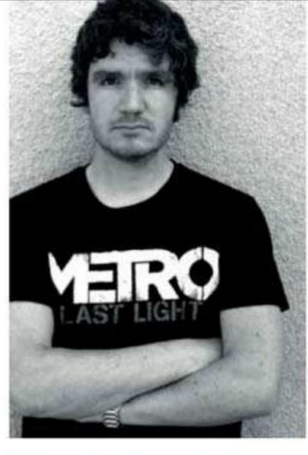
NO LAST LIGHT ON WII U

4A Games discusses the ceasing of development on the Wii U port

During our conversation with chief technical officer Oles Shishkovtsov and Huw Beynon, we asked whether the purported Wii U port was still in development. "No," Beynon confirms. "We had an initial look at the Wii U, but given the size of the team and compared to where we were last time, just developing for the PlayStation 3 is a significant addition. We had an early look at it, we thought we could probably do it, but in terms of the impact that would make on the overall quality of the game – potentially to its detriment – we just figured it wasn't worth pursuing at this time. It's something we might return to. I really couldn't make any promises, though."

Although we don't advise you hold your breath, as Shishkovtsov has less amicable things to say about the hardware. "Wii U has a horrible, slow CPU," the Ukranian states with amusing nonchalance. We're laughing, which is more than we can say for Wii U fans.

INSIDE 4A GAMES' UKRAINE STUDIO

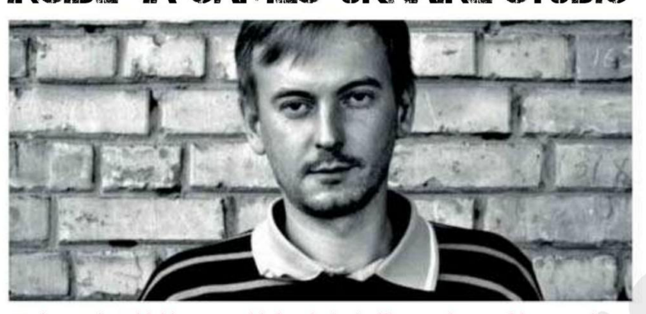


Above: Huw Beynon, studio communications lead. Below: 4A Games' office. Nice chandeliers.





Above: Creative director Andrew 'Prof' Prokhorov. Below: The studio's unassuming location.



Above: Oles Shishkovtsov, chief technical officer and man of few words. Not a massive fan of Nintendo's Wii U, apparently.





Right: Inside the studio's motion-capture suite. Below: The nearby Kiev Metro that inspired 4A.





CONNECTION
SIX GAMES THAT INSPIRED METRO: LAST LIGHT



Modern Warfare 2
Year: 2009 Developer: Infinity Ward

■ Action. The biggest, most explosive and nonsensical action the world has ever known has, in *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, pushed the envelope in terms of videogame spectacle. *Last Light* will no doubt be more restrained, but it's Infinity Ward's confidence that is most evidently emulated.

Crysis
Year: 2007 Developer: Crytek

■ Not so much influenced by the actual gameplay, but the engine that facilitates it. In much the same way Crytek developed its own eye-scorching engine, 4A has followed a similar route with likewise astounding results – all on a shoestring budget.



Fallout 3
Year: 2008 Developer: Bethesda

■ The post-nuclear wasteland doesn't get much more captivating than this. Bethesda's irradiated desert set both the template for creating a disquieting environment and how to populate each corner of a ravaged facsimile with disparate and fascinating locals.



Intricate Mythology
Outstanding Visuals
PC Slayer
Propriety Tech
Big Guns
Invigorating World
Colourful Denizens
Eerie Atmosphere
Permeating Dread
Mutants
Action
Set Pieces
Excitement
Bodycount
Explosions
Outrageous Weaponry
Compelling World
Mute Hero
Pacing
Storytelling
Eastern-European Setting
Terrifying World
Talent
Tone
More Mutants
Original Characters
Freedom
Pervasive World
Supernatural Frights
Dynamic AI

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.
Year: 2007 Developer: GSC Game World

■ With much of the 4A development team made up of ex-GSC employees, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s primordial scares and suffocating atmosphere has emigrated along with the development team.

Metro 2033
Year: 2010 Developer: 4A Games

■ Unsurprisingly, the first game has been a major influence on 4A Games' sequel. Innovative, original and fearless, expanding and refining the core concept has been imperative to *Last Light*'s development.

Half-Life 2
Year: 2004 Developer: Valve

■ 4A Games has admitted that Valve's seminal shooter has been a major source of inspiration, from the world's pervasive tone, through to the script, pace and action. Talk about setting the bar high.

role-playing a good person or a bad person," he says. "And essentially the player is playing this game with themselves. They make a choice: am I going to be the virtuous paragon, or am I going to be the amoral, evil person? That doesn't really reflect what that individual person is actually like, their own perception of the world, the way they perceive morality and good and evil. The minute you make the choice apparent, you've turned it into an abstraction, a game. So what I think is really interesting about *Metro* is the decisions are real decisions and you're not even aware you're making the decisions. The game is examining and analysing you as a person and a player based on how you behave and what you do. You may think that you're making an overt choice; other times you're making choices without even being aware you're making those choices, or judgements without knowing you're making those judgements, which is actually what we do in real life as people."

Does this suggest that there will be a greater emphasis on branching storylines? "It's not a branching narrative in the sense that you'll follow

While this is a rather quaint station, other stops won't be quite as hospitable.

two very different plotlines through the game. It's the cumulative result of you, the player; how you've approached the game; how you've perceived the game and the information you've been given and the choices you have made that will potentially take you, as they did in the first game, to an alternate ending. And if you then count back and look through the game, yes, you've fundamentally performed very similar actions and completed levels in the same sequence, but you internally had a very different experience from someone else who played it. It took people a long time to understand what was happening in *Metro 2033*, and coming to terms with the fact we don't wave the flag every time you make that choice and decision. To me, it feels much more sophisticated than what we see in other games, where it is treated as a gameplay mechanic."



These scenarios will take various forms, but it's not quite clear how the moment-to-moment impulses of the player and the way they approach missions will affect the overall outcome of the story. What is clearly visible is that 4A Games is pushing the boundaries of its world, inviting exploration and expression in each and every facet of the game design.

While Artyom was a naive, young conscript thrust into a hopeless situation in *Metro 2033*, his will to survive compensated for his lack of military distinction. In *Last Light*, he returns a veteran, reflected by a more robust array of skills. The team run us through one chapter of the game twice to emphasise the breadth of choice available to the player. The first playthrough has Artyom surreptitiously in the shadows, gently unscrewing light bulbs to remain concealed in the darkness, with his new Nixie tube watch flashing blue to indicate when he's visible. The environment itself is more sprawling – a dank water plant with various routes both above and underground refuse to spell a clear trail – enabling Artyom to carve his own path towards the exit without disturbing too many of the Reich troops patrolling the base. Inevitably, after shooting lights and tampering with the fuse box, some of the enemies begin to notice and, also inevitably, a few have to be dispatched to investigate. Players have the option to subdue enemies from behind with either a non-lethal or deadly manoeuvre. Once again, detail is paramount, and NPC reactions and incidental chatter do much to add colour to the world.

"THERE'S A LEVEL LATER IN THE GAME, WHICH I WAS PLAYING IN THE OFFICE LATE AT NIGHT, THAT LITERALLY MADE MY FLESH CRAWL AND THE HAIR STAND UP ON MY ARMS"

The D6 military base uncovered in *Metro 2033* represents the coveted prize that the three major warring factions will fight over.



"We have a lot of lighting dynamics, so you can shoot the lamps or screw the lamps," Prokhorov says, dictating the action on screen. "If you shoot or kill a lot of lamps, NPC chatter will be like, 'Hey! What the fuck?' If you continue this process,



The few portions of the game we saw took place towards the beginning, just after the E3 demo.

they will raise the alarm. If you open the door and a guard notices, he'll go, 'Hmmm, who opened the door?'" Prokhorov then proceeds to act out a few instances of NPC reactions, while also detailing how the dialogue can reveal new paths that would otherwise remain hidden. "It's standard human reaction," he adds. "The main goal of improvement was AI. AI, AI, AI. It took a lot of work in order to create a believable human behaviour. In the last game we had three mental conditions of NPC; now it's around ten, so now you have disturb, a little bit of disturb, and so on. Each takes a little work to do."

"People who found the game too difficult," says Beynon, "they didn't find the mechanics difficult; they just didn't understand the mechanics in the first place. The difference between this and the last one is that we've explained a lot of these mechanics better, introduced them in a more elegant way. There shouldn't be an obstacle to playing the game. We want the game to reward people while looking to a more cerebral experience, but there's a difference between cerebral and just being obtuse. So the balancing act is to increase accessibility but not sacrifice or compromise on complexity.

"We've introduced many more mechanics that the player has to control in terms of gameplay mechanics, depth and range of options and controls that they have available to them. So you might argue that, in some ways, we're making the game more complex."

Chatter turns once again to detail. The way each enemy's gun displays each bullet as it's rattled out towards the player. How each gun, when stripped apart, has a functional mechanism – we're treated to a look at the in-game showroom, featuring each gun laid out across a table and enemies sprinkled everywhere, which may or may not be included as a bonus in the shipped product – and later we're given a tour around what looks like a shed

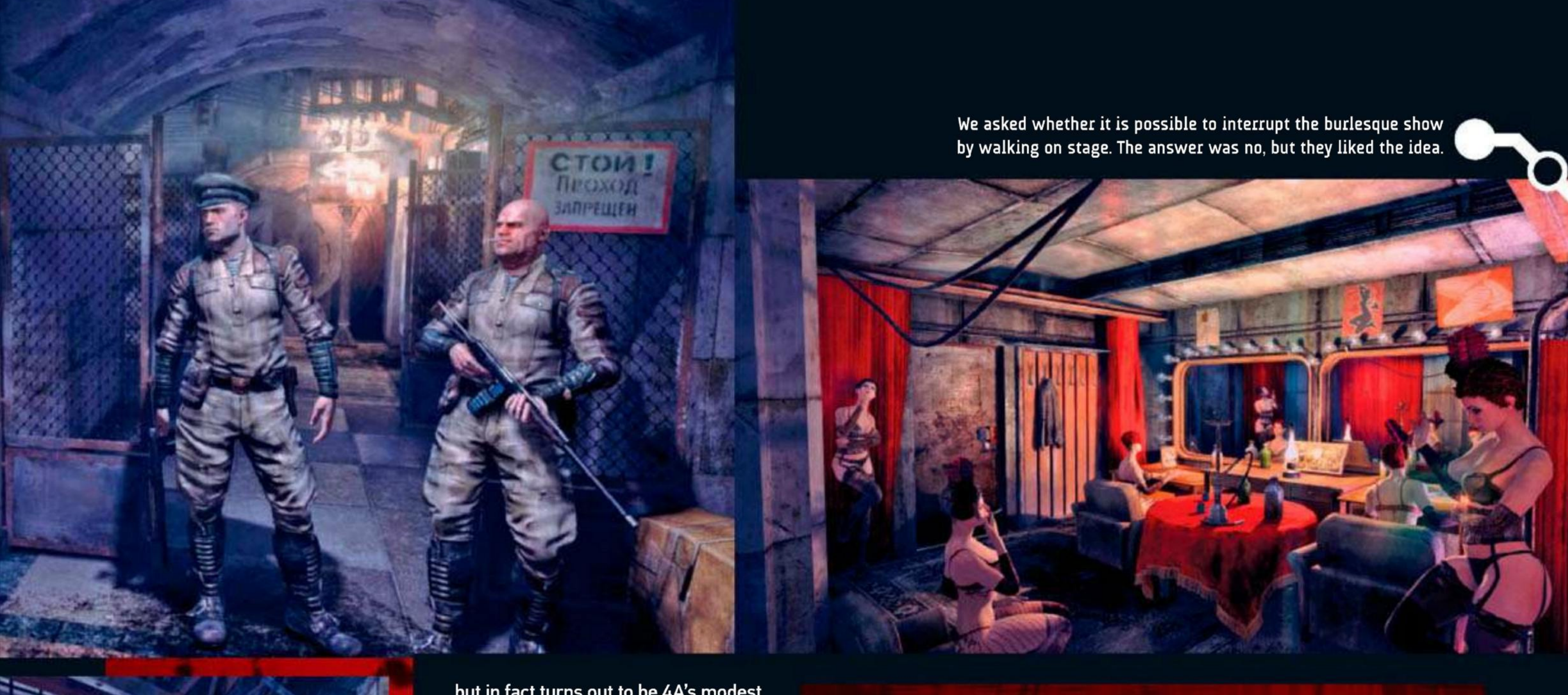


When we get to see the level for a second time, it's a truncated demonstration. Artyom struts straight into the foyer, unleashing shotgun round after shotgun round into unsuspecting enemies, blood splattering across his mask when the proximity allows it. A few stealthy knife kills bridge the action, and after a few minutes Artyom exits the arena with a pile of corpses in his wake.

Metro 2033 was no slouch when it came to features, but the means by which it conveyed the mechanics to the player was often convoluted, confusing and just plain bad. While significantly escalating the gameplay scale for the sequel, the issue of player accessibility becomes a topic of discussion, and the team is more than aware of past errors.

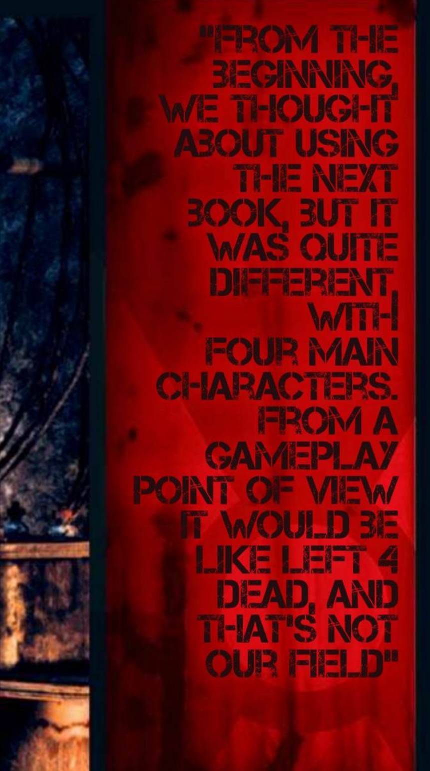


Stealth is a vital element to *Last Light*'s gameplay. Unscrewing lighting fixtures and remaining in the shadows is fundamental to success.



We asked whether it is possible to interrupt the burlesque show by walking on stage. The answer was no, but they liked the idea.





"FROM THE BEGINNING, WE THOUGHT ABOUT USING THE NEXT BOOK, BUT IT WAS QUITE DIFFERENT, WITH FOUR MAIN CHARACTERS. FROM A GAMEPLAY POINT OF VIEW IT WOULD BE LIKE LEFT 4 DEAD, AND THAT'S NOT OUR FIELD"

but in fact turns out to be 4A's modest motion-capture studio.

It's staggering to think this, such a humble outfit, has produced a game of this remarkable merit, while running it all on its own proprietary engine. If there's a pressure pushed upon the studio, we're seeing no signs of it. Even a brief conversation with Shishkovtsov about the technical hurdles yields no grievances, remaining blasé about the challenges of building the studio's tech from scratch. "Nothing difficult, just work," he shrugs.



By the time we get a taste for what lies outside the Metro system in *Last Light*, it's hardly a surprise. This is a pervasive and dynamic wilderness, surrounded by endless building husks and desolation, with mutants crawling around the surface world, feeding off the irradiated and toxic remains of humanity. Artyom must constantly find new air filters to survive out here, but 4A has forgone the handholding linearity of the first game and opened the wasteland for exploration. A few new mutant types bother our hero – a huge mantis-like insectoid appears, defending itself with pincers – and survival instincts come to the fore as the day/night cycle settles into darkness, when staying alive becomes more difficult.

"A lot of it is about making the player feel vulnerable," says Beynon. "Yes, you have this idea of limited resources, inventory management and being concerned whether you have the right resources at the right time, but it's about putting pressure on the player; making them fear the unknown, the unexpected; questioning their resources and their abilities. It's one of the core tenets of what makes survival horror."

Ah, horror. One aspect of *Metro* that has been noticeably absent from our session with the game has been the scares, and there's some concern that it's an element likely to be underplayed given the extinction of the nightmare-inducing Dark Ones at the end of *Metro 2033*. "There's a level later in the game, which I was playing in the office late at night, that literally made my flesh crawl and the hair stand up on my arms," reassures Beynon, refusing to tell us the specifics. But he does explain that the horror themes might come in an alternate guise. "You kind of got hints of it in the E3 demo in the plane flashback – I think that is a pretty intense moment. You see many ghosts and spirits of the past that come into the Metro, but fear is a lot of different things. We have those jump-out scares and moments like that, but it's more about the slow, creeping horror that takes a lot of time, a lot of careful pacing, to build up and develop."

There's a light at the end of the tunnel. The team is hurtling towards the sequel's tentative March 2013 release date, but there's little sign of lassitude from anyone at the studio. Even as we depart the office, we're met with pleasant courtesy from team members still arriving, several hours after we opened shop. While 4A continues to polish, fortify and expand the game in the coming months, we have a suspicion that everything we've seen today will have been reworked in some fashion. It's just part of the studio's fearless willingness to evolve, an attitude that wilfully pushes forward, constantly iterating and tweaking the minor details in the eleventh hour until the vision is complete. Ultimately, it's not the details that make *Metro: Last Light* a success, but what they amount to: a confident, full-bodied and unique product. By all accounts, the team has earned a few late mornings.

MULTIPLAYER CANCELLED

Huw Beynon discusses why Metro: Last Light has dropped its planned multiplayer mode

"LET'S CUT TO the chase on this one," deadpans Beynon when we raise the issue of multiplayer in *Last Light*. "Perhaps foolishly, we announced that we were going to have a multiplayer component. We had a fairly small team within the studio prototyping the multiplayer. We never showed it, and as we were getting closer to the end of development we looked at where the multiplayer was going and we didn't feel like we could really do it justice with the scope and resources we had here at the studio this time round – certainly not for the initial release of the game. I think for the benefit of the single-player game we've put the multiplayer component on hold and everyone is working full-time on the single-player."

HOW SCI-FI ARE YOU?

Use the SciFiNow flowchart to find out…

START

HAVE YOU SEEN STAR WARS?
STUPID QUESTION
NO
END

DID HAN SHOOT FIRST?
YES. YES. YES
NAH. IT WAS GREEDO

DO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE?
YES I DO
BELIEVE IN WHAT?

WOULD YOU PASS A VOIGHT-KAMPFF TEST?
NATURALLY
A WHAT-KAMPFF?

WOULD YOU PREFER AN IPAD OR ZIGGY?
IPAD
ZIGGY

IS MEMORABILIA FOR DESKS OR KIDS?
KIDS
DESKS

DO THESE MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU: 4,8,15,16, 23,42
LOTTERY PREDICTION?
OF COURSE

DO YOU KNOW WHAT EXACTLY THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES IS?
THEY SMELL A BIT?
SURE

WHAT DOES OCP STAND FOR?
HAVEN'T A CLUE
OMNI CONSUMER PRODUCTS

NOWHERE NEAR GEEKY ENOUGH. BUT THERE IS HOPE

WHAT MAKES TIME TRAVEL POSSIBLE?
FLUX CAPACITOR
NOTHING

UNOBTAINIUM OR ADAMANTIUM?
ADAMANTIUM
UNOBTAINIUM

DO YOU PLAY WITH YOUR MASHED POTATO?
YEP
NEVER

HOW DO YOU SPELL 'RECALL'?
NOT LIKE THAT
LIKE THAT

WHAT DOES V STAND FOR?
VIMTO
VISITORS. OR VENDETTA. WHICHEVER

WHO IS HAL JORDAN?
NO IDEA
EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT...

HOW DO YOU MAKE A SOYLENT GREEN?
PAINT IT?
WITH PEOPLE

WHERE IS BABYLON 4?
DUNNO
LOST IN TIME

FANCY A TRIP ON THE NOSTROMO?
ARE YOU MENTAL?
ISN'T THAT A VAMPIRE?

WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN ON 27 AUGUST 1997?
A PARTY?

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE CULTURE IS?
SUNDAY TIMES SUPPLEMENT?
JUDGMENT DAY
YES

WHAT CLASS OF PLANET IS VULCAN?
UPPER?
M

CAN YOU NAME THE FIVE?
SURE CAN'T
SURE CAN

SOMEWHERE INSIDE YOU IS A NERD TRYING TO GET OUT

THE FORCE IS WITH YOU. BUT YOU MUST TRAIN HARDER

IMPRESSIVE. YOUR SCI-FI KNOWLEDGE IS PRETTY AMAZING

WE BOW DOWN TO YOU, MASTER OF ALL GEEKDOM

STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS SEQUEL SECRETS
SciFiNow
EARTH'S MIGHTIEST PREVIEW
ASSEMBLING AVENGERS 2
THE WALKING DEAD
WOLVERINE RED DWARF X TOM BAKER

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20 GREAT GAMES



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It's no secret that game development is fraught with difficulties. On a daily basis, developers contend with technical impediments, financial limitations and general interference, among many similarly damaging obstacles that otherwise obstruct a creative vision. It shouldn't come as a shock that such hindrances can prove insurmountable, but it doesn't soften the blow when inventive concepts are tossed to the ether.

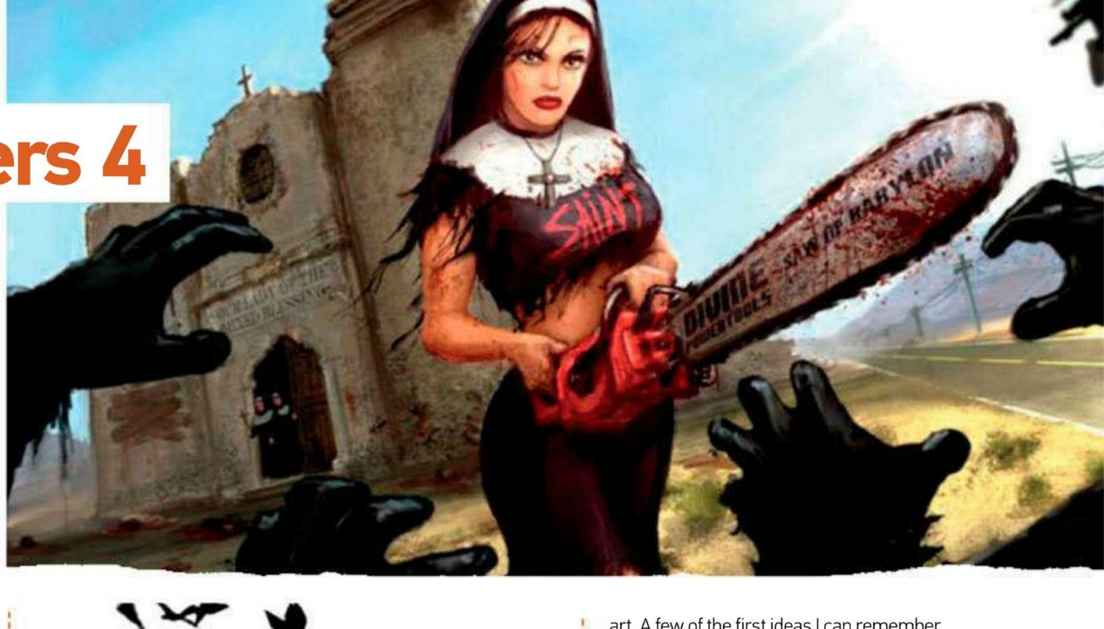
It's not just small developers that suffer the ignominy of a canned project. For every *Sadness*, the gothic Wii horror game from Studio Nibris, there's a *BC*, the unreleased prehistoric adventure from Peter Molyneux. Even Nintendo's A-list haven't escaped the scrap heap, with several *Mario*, *Zelda* and *Kirby* games deemed unworthy of reaching consoles.

"It's really hard at the time," admits Nic Watt, whose racing game, *Velocity*, never saw the light of day. "It starts to get to the point where it's your baby and you think, 'What did I do wrong? Could I have done something better?' There is a frustration for a lot of people depending on where they are in the company. There's a period of mourning almost, where everyone feels, 'That sucks! I just spent two and a half years on this!'"

Watt's comments are reminiscent of those of any developer who has invested a significant amount of time, effort and passion into a project, only for it to ultimately be shelved. It's impossible to tell whether the games that comprise our list would have ever fulfilled their promise and potential, but we can certainly celebrate their unique concepts and consider what could have been.

TimeSplitters 4

Developer: **Free Radical Entertainment**
Format: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360**



■ It would have been a bold new direction for one of the most critically acclaimed shooters ever made and from one of the world's greatest FPS developers. What went wrong? Former Free Radical Design employees Steve Ellis and Karl Hilton tell the *TimeSplitters 4* story in their own words.

So what happened to *TimeSplitters 4*?

KARL HILTON: *TimeSplitters 4* was in the very early stages of development when Free Radical went into administration. A small playable demo was shown to several publishers, but it didn't attract any publishing deals.

STEVE ELLIS: We pitched it to a lot of publishers, and from each of them we got the same two responses. Firstly, they would ask what happened with *Haze*. We were the company that made a series of high-rated shooters and then we had released *Haze*, which wasn't as well received. This worried them. Secondly, their marketing person would say something along the lines of, 'I don't know how to sell this.' The unanimous opinion among all publishers that we pitched *TimeSplitters 4* to is that you can't market a game that is based around a diverse set of characters and environments – you need a clear and easily communicated marketing message, and *TimeSplitters* doesn't have one. Perhaps they are all right. Perhaps this is why the previous games in the series achieved much more critical success than commercial success. For these reasons, one by one they all declined to sign the project.

When we spoke to David Doak a few years ago, he detailed that *TimeSplitters 4* would have featured multiple parodies of other popular games. How far did you get with the idea and what games were featured?

KH: The first *TimeSplitters* had featured a character in a dinosaur suit as our 'homage' to *Turok*, which was a successful franchise at that time. We really liked that character, and coupled with the general irreverent nature of *TS* – Cortez being the obvious example as a parody space marine – it seemed a natural progression. It was still in the very early planning stages, so little more had been done than some concept art. A few of the first ideas I can remember were underground street racing with the remote-control cat, and survival horror with monkeys. What else would *TS* use?



"IT IS ABSOLUTELY CRUSHING FOR ALL OF THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE POURED THEIR HEART AND SOUL INTO THE GAME FOR YEARS, AND IT NEVER FEELS LIKE A FAIR DECISION"

■ Despite a persistent rumour, *TimeSplitters 4* would not have been a Nintendo Wii exclusive. That would be mental.



Could *TimeSplitters 4* still happen in the future?

SE: I guess a new series of *The Wire* could still happen in the future. Or *Friends*. Or *TimeSplitters 4*. I'd like to see it happen, but I don't expect that it will. I think it could only happen if it was changed into a very different game that would appeal more to publishers – but then it wouldn't really be *TimeSplitters*. Maybe *TimeSplitters* was only really possible when dev costs were lower – when a 2-million-unit-selling game could make a profit. Also, of the 16 or so people who made the first game in the series, at least 10 or 11 of them, including myself, have moved on to other things now.

Crytek has said it would consider *TimeSplitters 4* when it sees proof that there's enough interest. How does it judge that? Is it something Kickstarter et al could prove?

SE: I think that's a polite way of saying that they know that there isn't enough interest. Personally I don't think it's possible, at least currently, for Kickstarter to fund it. Shooters cost a lot to develop these days – much more than even the largest Kickstarter-funded game project. Even if they could



■ Monkeying around as usual, *TimeSplitters 4* would have aped other popular games of the time.



■ Despite a passionate fan following, it looks unlikely that *TimeSplitters 4* will ever be resurrected.

raise as much as that one, it wouldn't be enough to do any more than develop a very limited prototype, so it would still need to convince a publisher to take a risk and front the bulk of the dev budget. I think that's the biggest problem – as costs increase, it becomes increasingly hard for publishers to take a risk on a project that strays too far from whatever is currently successful. *TimeSplitters 4* would need to sell more than any of the previous games in the series in order to cover the costs of bringing it to market. How do you convince a publisher that is a good bet?

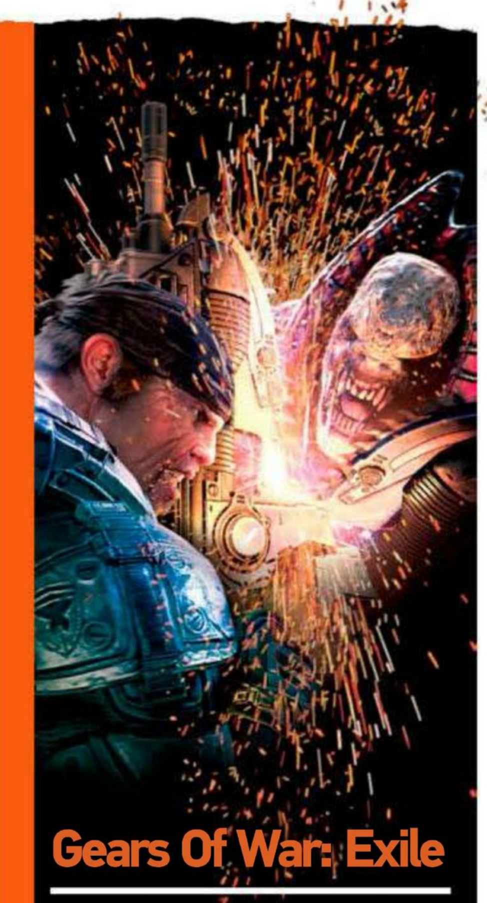
KH: I think it would depend on what type of game a new *TimeSplitters* could be. Crytek knows there is a fan base for the series, but any new game has to be right for the size and type of audience that know the *TimeSplitters* games, as well as newer player who might not be so familiar with it. The size and volume of a gaming community can always help guide development decisions, but there are many factors to consider, as making games can be a very expensive business.

You've notably had some high-profile projects cancelled during development. What's the general feeling through the studio when a game is canned?

SE: The events of 2008 weren't our first experience of having a game suddenly cancelled for financial reasons – we had a similar experience with Activision and *Second Sight* at the end 2003 when literally days after visiting us to pitch for the publishing rights to *TimeSplitters 3*, they decided to pull out of UK development entirely and cancelled something like ten projects across ten different companies, putting many of them out of business in the process. We survived that time because we had a little spare money in the bank from *TimeSplitters 2*. Aside from the obvious financial pressure that project cancellation causes, it is absolutely crushing for all of the people who have poured their heart and soul into the game for years, and it never feels like a fair decision. There is always the feeling that if it were the publisher's internal project they would have found an alternative to cancelling the project.

Can you describe the final months of Free Radical and the contributing elements to the studio's closure?

SE: That's a story. Many factors came together to contribute to the situation – we'd had difficulties with *Haze*, we hadn't managed to find backing for *TimeSplitters 4*, LucasArts had a sudden change of management and then cancelled two projects that we were developing for them without paying us the contractual termination fee, and a couple of other interesting opportunities – a *James Bond* project and an acquisition – didn't work out. It was the run-up to Christmas, so publishers were focused on their holiday releases rather than signing new projects, and also most of the world was in recession. If any of these things had not happened we may have survived, but all coming together it just wasn't possible to continue.

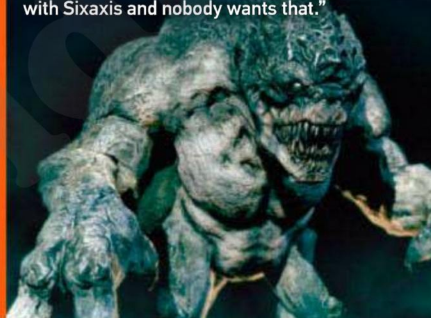


Gears Of War: Exile

Developer: Epic Games **Format:** Xbox 360

■ WHEN IT was rumoured that Epic was working on some arm-flailing Kinect iteration of *Gears Of War*, fans couldn't comprehend the prospect of a motion-controlled, on-rails extension of the brand. It turns out that Epic couldn't get its head around the idea either, abandoning the game before showcasing any footage. Nevertheless, there have been positive noises about Microsoft's peripheral in the past.

"I like Kinect, I've been a fan of it, but I don't think it has been fully realised as far as the potential of the device," Cliff Bleszinski told us on its release. "I'm curious how the core games are going to pan out. I've always said I'd rather build a dedicated Kinect game from the ground up with true focus as opposed to, 'Ah, Marcus can move his head now,' and then you wind up with Sixaxis and nobody wants that."





■ *This Is Vegas* was a casualty of Midway's financial woes, which claimed the company.

This Is Vegas

Developer: **Surreal Software**
Format: **PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360**

■ EVERYONE HAS their own perception of Vegas. The flicker of neon monstrosities looming over the Strip. The debauchery that has inspired a thousand bad Hollywood comedies. All of the above are perfectly acceptable representations, but they are, fundamentally, just a microcosm of the Vegas experience. It was also the problem that Surreal Software faced when unveiling *This Is Vegas* during a Midway showcase in the city, presenting footage of the player strolling into a nightclub to dance, scuffle and commence a wet T-shirt competition. It wasn't warmly received by the press.

"Some of the negativity was not entirely unexpected," explains senior producer Chris Klimecky. "We knew we were only showing a tiny snippet rather than really giving people a big-picture feel for what the whole game was. There were a lot of blanks – driving, the world, the story, missions and so on – that the people who saw it just couldn't fill in. Consumers were even more confused, so you got colourful descriptions like 'douchebag simulator'. That kind of thing stings when you know the full story."

After the disappointing reaction to the debut footage, the woes of Surreal Software continued to escalate, as Midway faced ever-deepening financial turmoil. Following the publisher's bankruptcy, Surreal was acquired by Warner Bros and continued working on *This Is Vegas*, only to find itself facing opposition from executives. "It all seemed well and good at the beginning," says Klimecky. "Things went downhill fast after the acquisition. They inserted management personnel to help but the game took an expected-to-us-but-surprising-to-them dip in progress after alpha, as the tech team tore the engine apart to optimise it. They panicked. We heard more about legal concerns regarding our parody characters from the corporate legal team and Warner Bros' stance to only ship products with their known IP."

"AT THE LOWEST QUALITY WE COULD STRING TOGETHER AT THAT POINT, IT WOULD TAKE US ANOTHER SIX TO EIGHT MONTHS"

Ultimately the bullet in the head for the open-world *GTA*-alike came when pressure to get the game shipped built to huge levels. "I'll never forget the meeting when I knew it was time to throw in the towel," laments Klimecky. "Many of the details are fuzzy, but I remember some clearly – [people were] livid. At some points there was yelling to 'ship the game' [...]. Wow, I thought. We're done. The directive was so antithetical to our entire team and project; there was no way it was going to work. Even at the lowest quality we could string together at that point, it would take us another six to eight months to be shippable at all. Easily another 12 months to get to where we would feel good about it. I had initially thought they were getting a deal, a $50 million game for $12-15 million. Obviously they had a different perspective. Whether they tried to make something else out of it or not, it was done as the project we cared about, and I was certainly done."



Tiberium

Developer: **EA Los Angeles**
Format: **PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360**

■ *TIBERIUM* CAN proudly lay claim to being the only game to have ever graced the cover of **games™** and not actually be released. EA's second attempt at transforming the *Command & Conquer* franchise into a genuine threat in the first-person shooter marketplace failed catastrophically. While it boasted some decent features – including multi-squad control – it failed to meet EA's quality standards, forcing the publisher to permanently shelve the title. Now if only EA had done the same with the terrible *Command & Conquer: Renegade*.

Metroid Dread



Developer: **Intelligent Systems**
Format: **Nintendo DS**

■ As 2D *Mario* adventures continue their enduring popularity, Nintendo was hoping to replicate the success with a return to Samus's roots in a long-rumoured new 2D DS instalment of *Metroid*. Yoshio Sakamoto has confirmed the game's existence several times over the past several years, but has recently stated that the project is likely to undergo a complete reset if it's ever to be released.



Glover 2

Developer: **Interactive Studios**
Format: **Nintendo 64**

■ OH, *GLOVER*, you really weren't cut out for this world, were you? While Interactive Studios' eponymous mitt wouldn't be amiss among Nintendo's pantheon of cutesy characters – sadly, we don't think he's the inspiration for Master Hand, the *Smash Bros* games' final boss – the wandering hand-sock didn't receive the gracious reception it deserved on release. Thus, a planned sequel that would have introduced a boxing glove was canned mid-development.

DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH

Three games still in development limbo



Six Days In Fallujah

■ THOUGHT DEAD since going MIA after Konami backed out of publishing the title in 2009, *Six Days In Fallujah* is very much alive according to Atomic games' president, Peter Tamte. "Atomic got hit hard by three things simultaneously," he tells **games™**. "One: Konami pulling out of *Six Days* cost Atomic many, many millions of dollars. Two: The market for packaged videogames began a rapid decline, causing many distributors that owed us money not to pay and virtually eliminating our ability to attract new investors for a packaged videogame. Three: Consumers began moving to digital platforms and free games much faster than most of us anticipated. However, *Six Days* is definitely not cancelled. It is very important to us for reasons far beyond just making a product that we finish *Six Days*, but it will require time and persistence."

Bulletstorm 2

■ AFTER THE disappointing sales of the original and the fact that People Can Fly has moved on to *Gears Of War: Judgment*, it looked like Epic had given the slow-mo boot to the dick-joke-laden shooter. However when talking to Epic Games' Tanya Jensen, she's quick to rebuff such claims. "As far as I know we never announced a *Bulletstorm 2*," she states, "so to say it was cancelled would be jumping to conclusions."

Shenmue III

■ *SHENMUE* CREATOR Yu Suzuki envisioned the story being told over 16 chapters. The first *Shenmue* covered the first, while its sequel covered chapter three to five and chapter two exists as a manga spin-off. Sega pulled the plug on the sequel years ago after poor sales of *Shenmue II*, but Suzuki has been talking up acquiring the rights for years. Will it actually happen? We remain, perhaps quixotically, optimistic of a third entry.

Skate Or Die

Developer: **Criterion Games**
Format: **PlayStation 2**

■ AFTER THE success of the first two *Burnout* games, Criterion found itself in an enviable position as publishers came knocking. However, before the studio was employed to reinvent the *Need For Speed* franchise, EA approached it to adapt another property. "Criterion started talking to EA in 2002, and they asked if we'd be interested in doing a remake of the old C64 and NES game *Skate Or Die*," reveals creative director Alex Ward. "These guys wanted to make a skateboarding game, so we did it. This is the first game Criterion made with EA and these guys were on what was then the *Airblade* team. Sony were interested in a sequel but the guys didn't want to do that."

For Criterion, the interest was to develop a skating game that distanced itself from its competitors. "In *Tony Hawk's* you were always on the board, and it was all about tricks and high scores, but I wanted to explore what it was like to just go out for a skate and have that feeling of just doing whatever you want," says designer Craig Sullivan. "There was that experience from when I went skating in real life that just wasn't captured in videogames. I wanted to be able to get off the board – this was way back in 2002." But after intense pressure working with Sony on *Airblade*, the studio foresaw further publisher interference as development began on *Skate Or Die*.

"With *Skate Or Die*, we were working with the big boys, with EA. We had people coming to us early in the project wanting to know where it was going to be," explains Ward. "Obviously we wanted to work with EA because we were an independent studio at the time and we wanted to work with the best publishers."

However, Ward and his team failed to gain a strong grasp on the central concept, the clarity of vision becoming blurred as the project moved forward.

"We didn't even know the rules of the game," Ward admits. "EA was a much more professional company than Criterion – we were only maybe 130 people, if that. It was an eye-opening experience. At this time, the *Airblade* team was the A-team and the *Burnout* team was the B-team. We were told, 'You can't just make a *Tony Hawk* game – it's got to be like *GTA*', and that was the first time we were like, 'Really?' 'It's got to be open world…?' Well, what does that mean? Nobody really knew.

"There was a lot of anger and frustration. […] Then we got a call from the *Need For Speed* guys and they said, 'We can't work with you guys any more. […] You just walked away.' I remember coming back to my desk and there was a folder on my desktop called EA, and I just clicked delete. We learned a lot about how a game should be made, and we learned a lot about working with a publisher – how we had to get our shit together but also how we had to stand our ground."

"EA WAS A MUCH MORE PROFESSIONAL COMPANY THAN CRITERION – WE WERE ONLY MAYBE 130 PEOPLE, IF THAT. IT WAS AN EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE"

Fortunately, the fractured relationship was repaired, as shortly afterwards EA approached Criterion again, this time to work on more familiar subject matter. So while *Skate Or Die* stalled out, it led to the amazing *Burnout 3*.



■ Without *Skate Or Die*'s failure, *Burnout 3* would never have been made. Silver lining…

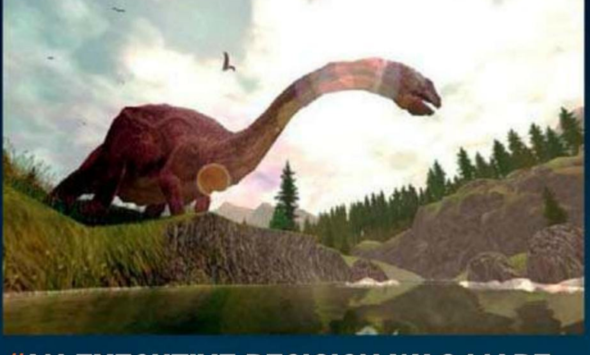
BC

Developer: Intrepid Games/Lionhead Studios
Format: Xbox

■ WORDS LIKE 'groundbreaking', 'ambitious' and 'revolutionary' are perhaps thrown around a little too loosely in the presence of Peter Molyneux, but it's easy to forget there was a time when he let the games do the talking, rather than his over-eager lips. Back in 2004 it was hard to consider *BC* to be anything other than monumentally ambitious, offering a huge prehistoric era to explore, charting the evolution of the human race.

"We were driven by trying to create a completely simulated environment," says co-founder and artist for Intrepid Games Joe Rider. "We wanted all the creatures to work within a living ecosystem, or an attempt to produce one. A lot of the rules of how each game environment worked was underwritten by this really advanced artificial intelligence architecture. In parallel, we were pushing and trying to redefine the boundaries of procedural gameplay, and those two things working together were producing some jaw-dropping gameplay moments."

A mammoth technical undertaking, Rider admits that one of the contributing factors to *BC*'s eventual cancellation was the lack of collaboration between internal Lionhead teams. "*BC* and *Fable* were in dual development and *BC* was probably about six months behind *Fable* on the development track," Rider explains. "Looking back, one of the poor decisions that was made was



"AN EXECUTIVE DECISION WAS MADE TO PUT EVERYTHING BEHIND FABLE AT THE EXPENSE OF BC"

not to share technology between the two studios. Both studios were developing their own proprietary technology – shaders, engines, AI systems – and although the games were very different, I think clearly, looking back, we would have been better served by working more cooperatively."

Technical issues notwithstanding, *BC* was still on target for its release date, but what proved to be the proverbial asteroid hurtling towards *BC* was a new hardware generation, ushering in the extinction of the primeval adventure. "Sony brought out the PlayStation 3 nearly a year ahead of schedule and in turn Microsoft pushed forward the 360 launch window by nine months," explains Rider. "It was unlikely that *Fable* and *BC* would both be finished on time with the current resources available. An executive decision was made to put everything behind *Fable* at the expense of *BC* because both products couldn't be made with the resources available in the now-reduced period of time."

Rider and his team ramped up development in an attempt to bring the date forward, but the writing was on the wall. "It was probably about 75 per cent finished, maybe a bit more," he says. "We created quite a radical new development timetable and we were challenged with doing quite a lot of work within quite a short amount of time. It was just about impossible to do that. We had no additional resources; all the studio resources at Lionhead had been pillared to *Fable*, so *BC* was in a position where we had to basically achieve the impossible to keep the project alive. We tried very hard, but ultimately we didn't have the resources to do what we had to do to get it out a year early, effectively."









■ Perhaps the pinnacle of Peter Molyneux's extravagant ideas, *BC* was truly ambitious.

Much of the team disbanded afterwards, many of them going on to form Media Molecule and create *LittleBigPlanet* – which Rider suggests inherited some of *BC*'s algorithms and gameplay concepts. There was some internal chatter about resurrecting the game on the 360, but it ultimately proved fruitless. "There were three guys working on concept documents for a 360 version," reveals Rider. "The IP had been signed over to Microsoft by then, so there was little incentive for Lionhead to do that from a corporate perspective. There was still a lot of ambition and enthusiasm for the project internally but I don't think it was taken seriously at that time. Peter had his next-gen game he wanted to work on, and by that time half of the studio had been let go. I think from their perspective it would have been counter-productive to start it at that time. Interestingly, even two or three years down the line, all of us involved with the project get calls, letters and approaches from people who want to see the project resurrected. It really caught people's imagination."

■ While firm gameplay details were never released, *BC* centred around evolving your Neanderthal man.





Star Wars: Battlefront III

Developer: Free Radical Entertainment
Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

■ FREE RADICAL'S most tragic cancellation was *Star Wars: Battlefront III*, the amazing tech demos for which have since leaked onto the internet, revealing what could well have been the best *Star Wars* game ever made. So what happened?

"It felt like we had turned a corner as a company," says Steve Ellis. "We had a dark period during the development of *Haze*, we'd had problems with our tech, and we'd had some growing pains as we expanded, but it really felt like we were finally coming out of the other side intact. We were making a game with very high ambition. You could start a battle on the ground, jump into a ship and fly into space, continuing on to dock in a capital ship and continue the battle there. We'd had to build all kinds of new tech and overcome numerous technical challenges, but we had done it. We had a 99 per cent finished game that just needed bug fixing for release. It should have been our most successful game, but it was cancelled for financial reasons. I'm happy that people did at least get to see what we were working on and share the team's enthusiasm for it."

Free Radical and Rare veteran Martin Wakeley, who now works at iOS studio Crash Lab with Ellis, was at Free Radical Design during the cancellation of *Battlefront III* and remembers the difficult time well. "As a member of staff, I could see our relationship with LucasArts becoming more distant and feared the worst," he recalls. "They had a change of management and a change of direction. I wasn't party to all the ins and outs, but we had both our games signed with them, and it became apparent that we needed to look for other projects fast. [Free Radical] management were very open and we were kept informed of all developments. We worked hard to try and get some projects signed, but it wasn't to be. The writing was on the wall for a long time, but people stayed loyal rather than jumping ship."

The cancellation of *Battlefront III* was one of a number of events that ultimately spelled the end for Free Radical.

"WE HAD A 99 PER CENT FINISHED GAME THAT JUST NEEDED BUG FIXING. IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN OUR MOST SUCCESSFUL GAME"

Sadness

Developer: Nibris Format: Wii

■ THERE WAS always a worry that Nibris' black-and-white psychological horror game *Sadness* would turn out to be vapourware. The studio was continually backpedalling announcements, promising new assets and information, but as time passed there was nary a hint of the finished product. But this was a time when the Wii was lacking mature titles and the interest refused to dwindle, all the way up to its announced cancellation and studio closure in 2010.

The idea remains hugely promising. Set on the brink of World War I in Ukraine, players are abandoned in the countryside, tasked with protecting their blind son from supernatural entities that stalk the wilderness. The game would enable players to utilise any available items as weapons and the end would be influenced by the player's choices, resulting in one of ten possible conclusions. Ultimately, the project proved too ambitious for the developer, and after unsuccessfully farming out programming and visuals to external studios, the game disappeared along with Nibris.



Gun Loco

Developer: Square Enix Format: Xbox 360

■ SQUARE ENIX promised a fresh spin on the action shooter when it announced *Gun Loco* back at Gamescom 2010. In a desolate future, the world's murderous types are shipped off to a remote prison colony and let loose. Vying for control, players would utilise a combination of acrobatic prowess and shooting. Square Enix hasn't commented on the cancellation of the ultra-violent blaster.



Killing Day

Developer: Ubisoft Format: PlayStation 3

■ **RECEIVING ITS first public showing at E3 2005, the realistic first-person shooter from Ubisoft was shaping up to be a Sony exclusive with some serious visual clout. The publisher remained tight-lipped on the title in the subsequent years, before finally announcing its cancellation in 2012. Nevertheless, the aesthetics remains just as impressive today.**



Frame City Killer

Developer: Namco Bandai Format: Xbox 360

■ A SORT of *GTA*-cum-*Deus Ex* third-person shooter set in a futuristic Asian metropolis, *Frame City Killer* unfortunately looked outdated the moment the first screenshots were revealed. Perhaps Namco's first attempts at using Unreal Engine 3 proved too troublesome, but ultimately its failure to impress at trade shows and suffering numerous production delays led to the project's cancellation.

5 UNRELEASED VIDEOGAME CONSOLES

It's not just software that gets left to die. Here are five pieces of hardware that never saw the light of day



Ultravision Video Arcade System Year: 1982

■ ULTRAVISION PROMISED everything. A 10-inch colour TV, a videogame console and a powerful computer, all integrated into one chunky monstrosity. Its marketing guff boasted the ability to play Atari 2600 and ColecoVision games, but not surprisingly this Frankenstein's monster never came to life.

Atari Jaguar Duo

Year: **1995**

■ **THE WRITING was on the wall for the Atari Jaguar by the time Sony had launched the PlayStation, but the company ploughed ahead in a futile attempt to rival its new competitor. Atari's intention was to combine its base console with its Jaguar CD-ROM drive, but it was declared dead on arrival and never made it into full production.**



Infinium Labs Phantom

Year: **2004**

■ IT COULD be argued that the Phantom was too ahead of its time. This console was designed to play PC games on a TV set, but would eschew removable media. Instead, it would download games from the internet – something that wasn't quite so simple on the network connections of 2004. After consuming a ruinous amount of money – over $60 million – the console disappeared without a trace.

Panasonic M2 Year: 1997

■ **ORIGINALLY CONCEIVED as the follow-up to the 3DO, the tech was eventually sold to Panasonic, which wanted to muscle in on the console marketplace. A rather bizarre set of circumstances caused Panasonic to change tack, instead integrating the technology into multimedia players, ATMs and vending machines, where it is still in frequent use today.**

Atari Game Brain

Year: **1977**

■ ON THE eve of the Atari 2600 launch, the company was on the verge of releasing its first cartridge-based console. It wasn't too dissimilar to previous Atari consoles, with each interchangeable cartridge featuring the same custom IC chips found in its standalone units. Wisely, the company deemed it pointless and waited for the release of the 2600.



Project Van Buren (Fallout 3)

Developer: **Black Isle Studios** Format: **PC**

■ THERE'S LITTLE question that Bethesda's *Fallout 3* was a remarkable feat. But as **games™** explores the vault of abandoned projects, there's one that has captured the imagination of gamers more than any other: *Project Van Buren*. Or, as it's more commonly known, Black Isle Studios' *Fallout 3*. The original *Fallout* developer was hard at work on a second sequel, but in Brian Fargo's opinion, the project never coalesced during development.

"I don't think there was a point in which *Fallout 3* was near complete, but I was gone at that point," he reveals. "There seemed to be no sense of the correlation of quality and sales with the new owners, and that would affect everything. In truth, the company needed to do a restart, but there was too much baggage to allow that to happen at that point. Maybe it was best that a *Fallout 3* did not come out of the 'new' Interplay, as it might have damaged the brand."

Fargo's worries notwithstanding, lead designer Chris Avellone maintains that Black Isle's *Fallout 3* would have been a huge step forward. "[To describe *Fallout 3*] in marketing speak, I would say the notion of an adversary is an interesting thing, and it's too limiting for *Fallout 3*," he says. "In *Fallout 3*, you'll find yourself in a larger world where the roles of protagonist and antagonist are blurred and change over time as your actions change the world, for better or worse. And you may even realise that the best way to save a world is to take on the mantle of the bad guy."

Still, the gameplay fundamentals wouldn't have strayed far from the established formula. "The goal was 'don't fix what isn't broken'," Avellone admits, before detailing new gameplay elements that would have been implemented. "*Fallout 3* [would have] added Science Boy to the existing Sneak-Talk-Combat Boy solution matrix, inspired after reading *Lucifer's Hammer*; given you a wider range of PC races; breathed life into skills that have become boring, dead or unbalanced; and shown you a slice of the *Fallout* world that you've never seen. What lies to the East beyond NCR, and what is life like on the borders of the wasteland? We recognised it had been a long time since people played *Fallout*, and we didn't want to introduce mechanics or elements that we felt didn't match the mechanics of the original. As a result, we focused on evolutions of *Fallout 2* systems, not overhauls."

While Avellone was clearly passionate about the project, he left Black Isle, fearful that *Fallout 3* would be cancelled in much the same way as *Baldur's Gate III*. "As for why *Fallout 3* got cancelled, my understanding was that its PC-centric focus made Executive Row decide to cancel it," he says. "I don't know how the game would have been received if it had been released, to be honest. It had departed from a number of elements in the original design – not in a bad way – so I couldn't say. If the original *Van Buren* had been released, I believe people would have been really happy with it and been happy with the RPG evolution in the conflict mechanics."

"MAYBE IT WAS BEST THAT A FALLOUT 3 DID NOT COME OUT OF THE 'NEW' INTERPLAY, AS IT MIGHT HAVE DAMAGED THE BRAND"

■ The genre's dwindling popularity marked the end for *Fallout 3* in this form.



StarCraft: Ghost

Developer: Nihilistic Software
Format: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox

■ IF *STARCRAFT: GHOST* proves one thing, it's that sometimes brand recognition just isn't enough. Blizzard has yet to comment on the game's cancellation, but after years of swinging between developers and missing release windows and even intended platforms, there's little chance that players will ever see *Ghost* as it was originally intended. It's a shame, as the *StarCraft* universe is ripe for a more personal perspective on the tremendous lore.





Star Fox 2

Developer: Argonaut Format: SNES

■ DESPITE BEING complete, a SNES sequel to *Star Fox* was never released, due to the emerging new technology. "PlayStation had just come out as we were finishing things off and it overshadowed everything – especially the Super FX chip – and this was the main reason for stopping the release," explains *PixelJunk* creator Dylan Cuthbert, who worked on the original and its sequel. "It was a shame but definitely the right decision. SNES was looking older and older thanks to the release of the Saturn and PlayStation." Thankfully, the ROM is available online, so it's possible to play this lost piece of Nintendo history.

"PLAYSTATION HAD JUST COME OUT AND IT OVERSHADOWED EVERYTHING – ESPECIALLY THE SUPER FX CHIP"

Division 9

Developer: Irrational Games Format: PC



■ AMONG IRRATIONAL Games' impressively varied back catalogue, there's one game that seems at odds with its surroundings. *SWAT 4* – a clinical first-person strategy shooter – was certainly a job for hire, but publisher Vivendi was so impressed that it approached the developer to brainstorm a follow-up. "Creatively, I was like, '*SWAT 5*? What are we going to do?'" Ken Levine recalls, but instead of rebuffing the proposition, Irrational proposed a twist on the template, integrating the tactical action with some old-fashioned survival horror. The resulting pitch bears close similarity to the likes of *Left 4 Dead*, *Minecraft* and the upcoming *Fortnite*. "It had a lot of base-building," says art director Nate Wells. "You'd be working from a base and going out into the zombie area, and you'd meet people and bring them back, and they'd be engineers that could develop weapons for you. It was very old-school. It was almost *X-COM*."

Division 9 has more in common with Irrational's heritage than *SWAT 4*, encapsulating a sense of foreboding and dread across its haunted game world. Sound familiar? It was a tone that was conveyed effectively through *BioShock*, but the potential of a zombie apocalypse told in Irrational's style remains a tantalising prospect and one that the developer was clearly passionate about. However, the world of Rapture would come calling, and an impending deal to sell the studio eventually scuppered the vision.

"We had set up *BioShock* with Take-Two," says Levine. "We had two teams – one team was doing *BioShock*, and the Australian team still needed a project to do. They did [a] prototype and we took it out and we were able to get Vivendi really interested. We were just about to sell the company [to Take-Two] at the same time, and obviously we couldn't do both. So we actually got somebody to buy the game, but it was just too late for us. It was the only game we ever sold but never made."

■ *Division 9* had multiple features that bear similarities to *Left 4 Dead* and *Minecraft*.

The Legend Of Zelda: Mystical Seed Of Courage

Developer: Capcom Format: Game Boy Color

■ ORIGINALLY INTENDED as the third part of a trilogy that incorporated what eventually became *Oracle Of Seasons* and *Oracle Of Ages*, *Mystical Seed Of Courage* eventually proved too ambitious for Capcom. The complexities of crafting three intertwining stories took its toll on the developer, and it was Miyamoto himself who stepped in to suggest that development be scaled back to focus on two titles, cancelling the third entry completely.



Project HAMMER

Developer: Nintendo Format: Wii

■ NINTENDO HASN'T been overly fond of launching new IPs in recent years. Aside from the increasing ubiquity of Mii-focused adventures, the company hasn't launched a genuinely new franchise in years. It's hardly surprising, then, that *Project HAMMER* received such overwhelming attention after its 2006 announcement – it heralded the start of a bold, brand new IP for Nintendo. It also would have silenced plenty of the console's naysayers, with the hulky protagonist stomping around the third-person brawler with a jumbo hammer, smashing things. It was a congruent combination of Wii motion functionality and the much-craved core gaming experience.

Velocity

Developer: Sierra Format: Unknown

■ *Velocity* was a racer in which players had to compete in street races and competitions for cash and respect before interference hurt it. "Every two or three months a new racing game would come out," says Nic Watt, "and [the publisher] would be like, '*Gran Turismo 3* is doing really well – we need all those features.' And then *Midnight Club* came out, 'so it needs to be open-world as well.' We ended up having all this cool technology but none of it was finished, so they freaked out and pulled the plug."


ASS
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CHALLENGING umptions

Call Of Duty is a seemingly unstoppable juggernaut, smashing through first week sales records come every November release. Maintaining that momentum means finding new ways to draw in a larger crowd, but has Black Ops II done enough to interest more than just the hardcore fan base? We talk to Treyarch to ascertain exactly what's been done to keep Call Of Duty from stagnating…



At this year's Eurogamer Expo, Treyarch game design director David Vonderhaar took to the stage for a talk entitled 'Challenging Assumptions'. Those expecting insight into a radical overhaul of the military shooter were to be disappointed; Vonderhaar's talk was focused instead on the details of *Call Of Duty*'s Prestige system, challenging only the assumption that levelling up would see your unlocks reset to zero. Not to be, we were told. Now your unlocks carry through each time you hit the Prestige button. Cue standing ovation and rapturous applause.

Or perhaps not.

Fair enough. Fans of *Call Of Duty* are right to celebrate the modification of an outdated mechanic that has punished skill for several years now, and it's commendable that Treyarch is wilfully disrupting concepts that have been seemingly untouchable since first laid out by Infinity Ward in 2007. Nevertheless, for the rest of the gaming public, uninterested in such minutiae, is Treyarch challenging the formula where it really matters?

Those aspects of *COD* that have kept it beleaguered with the joint status of being the most loved and yet also the most despised game of all time seem untouched, *Black Ops II* still sporting the repetitive whack-a-mole gameplay and the curse of endlessly chasing a 'follow' sign. Is Treyarch addressing the real, all-encompassing concern that, as Robert Bowling so poetically put it, the *Call Of Duty* series represents, "Too much 'pew pew', not enough 'new new'"?

"I'm right here. I'm not deaf. I can see and hear what people say about those things," Vonderhaar tells **games™** when questioned about the dichotomy in the perception of *Call Of Duty.* "I think any time there's going to be criticism about anything, it would be foolish to not be aware of what the sentiment is. You have to be plugged in.

"So when you talk about 'challenging assumptions', what you're saying is that this is a very successful game franchise and it's challenging to push it forward," he continues. "You don't want to upset a very passionate and rabid fan base, but the game needs to evolve, right? You have to do that in the right ways, and that's complex. It's hard to figure out. But we have to challenge our own assumptions as developers about how we have to engage with fans. That's what the talk is about. We have to think really hard and critically about how to evolve such a popular game."

Updating the manner in which the multiplayer levelling works is one way of tightening the bolts on the franchise, but it's a minor alteration compared to some of the radical overhauls Treyarch has posed to the *Call Of Duty* machine.

Case in point: the 2025 setting. Heading into the future might have been a move made out of necessity rather than choice – where else can the series go after plundering the battlefields of the past and tearing down nearly every recognisable monument of the present? But Treyarch isn't just shunting the series into the future so it can include some shinier technology; it's a choice made with clear regard to the setting's capacity to genuinely evolve the gameplay.

"The future setting for *Black Ops II* is a natural manifestation of where the guys wanted to take the game," says the director of communications at Treyarch, John Rafacz. "There were two or three things that were a factor in this. There was the kind of story they wanted to tell, what they wanted to do to push the story forward, and there was the creativity and gameplay variety that could come out of exploring the setting.

"As developers, we're gamers at heart and all of us ask ourselves the question, 'As a fan, what would I need to see to keep coming back?' When you're talking about variety in gameplay, having something set in the near future really just opens up what we can do."

The proliferation of drones in the game, along with new gadgetry with which to combat them, promises new challenges and objectives that, if designed with a bit of creativity and good sense, won't rely on overly familiar AC-130 overwatch missions or clandestine dual sniper takedowns to deliver our kicks.

"When it comes to the time period, you can find so much inspiration," says Vonderhaar. "We

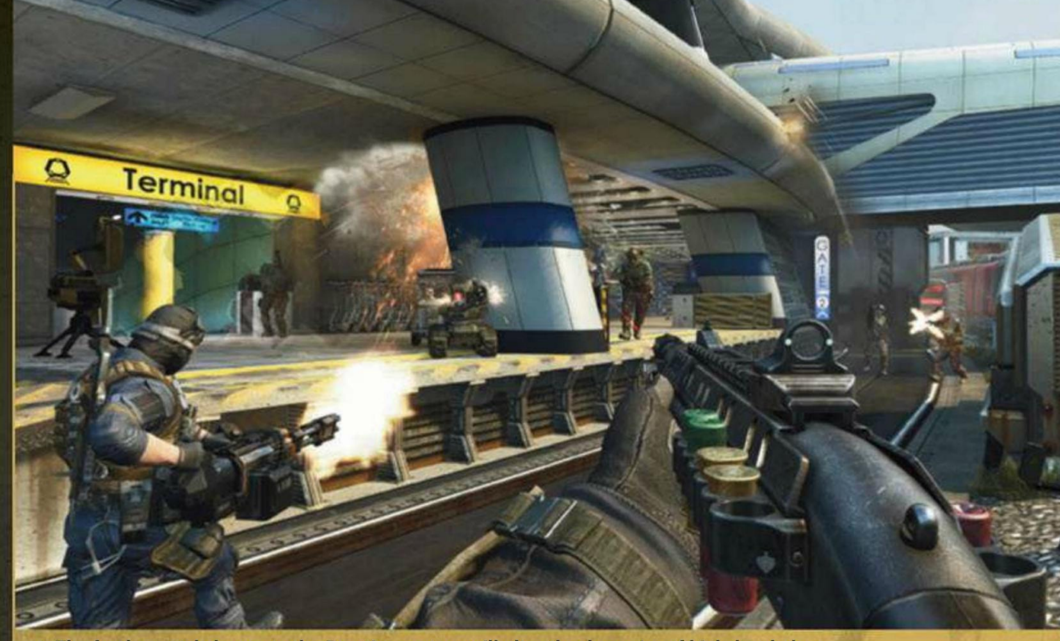
started looking at technologies that exist but aren't necessarily being used now in real battle spaces. You'll find that inspiration throughout the game with the Guardian and the Millimetre Scanner. We're also seeing a lot of non-lethal equipment and gear, so that's why we have the Shock Charge. We get to be futurists and that's really fun."

It's not just the content that has been altered by the near-future setting, but mission structure too, with *Black Ops II* attempting to subvert the military shooter's issues with overt linearity through the introduction of Strike Force missions.

"We live in this crazy world where, on one hand, people expect the linear, epic, cinematically intense story experience, but at the same time it's like, 'Where's my non-linear experience?'" says Rafacz. "So in single-player you've got this epic storyline with set piece moments, and you'll play, go through checkpoints and advance as you would in previous *Call Of Duty* experiences, but then there's that demand for innovation, and that's where the Strike Force missions come in.



THESE LEVELS INTRODUCE NON-LINEARITY FOR THE FIRST TIME. At several points in the campaign, a head of special forces will present himself to you and will talk about these 'proxy wars' happening in parallel to the campaign. You'll pick one, then be thrown into it with objectives to complete. You'll be able to choose any weapon you need and play straight ahead, boots on the ground with gun in hand. Conversely, you can assume control of one of the drones and go into overwatch mode to set waypoints and issue commands – whatever you need to advance the action.



★ The fundamental change to the Prestige system will alter the dynamics of high-level play.

"The argument was that we were too linear – now we've added non-linearity to the recipe. We are acutely aware of the expectations that people have and the need to make good on the core mechanics that people expect, but we're also acutely aware of some of the places people expect us to push."

The Strike Force missions are a tentative move off the rollercoaster rails the series has felt so adamantly welded to in the past, shifting *Call Of Duty* into a new space without being too disruptive to the usual flow. It's also a clever way of introducing some of the flavour of the multiplayer into the campaign experience, with many of the Strike Force missions taking place on open, deathmatch-esque maps and based around objectives similar to those encountered in a game of Domination.

There's something of the RPG seeping into the experience – not on the dice-rolling side but in terms of the narrative, with the campaign's story shaped

TREYARCH VS INFINITY WARD

How do Activision's big two COD studios stack up?

Treyarch		Infinity Ward
16	YEARS ACTIVE	10
29	GAMES MADE	6
250	EMPLOYEES	100
WORLD AT WAR	★	MODERN WARFARE
15.98 million	SALES	15.73 million
84	METACRITIC	94
BLACK OPS	★	MODERN WARFARE 2
26.21 million	SALES	22.69 million
87	METACRITIC	94
BLACK OPS II	★	MODERN WARFARE 3
31 million (projected)	SALES	26.50 million
TBC	METACRITIC	87

★★★

THE BIG BOSS SPEAKS OUT

We talk to Treyarch studio head Mark Lamia about the changes made to Call Of Duty's tried and tested formula

★ Was the future setting a necessary change with the series having pretty much exhausted both historical and modern settings?
Not necessarily. Much as *Black Ops* opened up a world of new creativity by setting in the Cold War during the Sixties, *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II* really allowed us to expand in similar ways by setting it in 2025. It provides the opportunity to tell a time-spanning narrative between the first Cold War and the new Cold War of the near future. While it allowed us to tell a generation-spanning story that introduces you to new themes, new technology, new weaponry and new characters, it also reacquaints players with old friends like Woods, who will take us back in time, in a flashback style, to the first Cold War. Being able to represent both time periods has been an exciting creative challenge.

★ Are the Strike Force missions an attempt to bring a multiplayer feel to parts of the solo campaign so that those who don't play online can still enjoy a take on the series' most popular feature?
The introduction of Strike Force levels does several things: it allows us to innovate with how we tell the story – introducing non-linear structures to the campaign and branching storylines. But it also, as you point out, allows us to introduce players with the opportunity to engage in more sandbox-style gameplay, which shares some similarities to online gameplay, all the while having a meaningful impact on their core, single-player experience.

★ With *Black Ops* standing as the bestselling game of all time in the US, how much pressure is there on the studio for the sequel to equal or surpass this record?
We put a ton of pressure on ourselves to deliver each and every time we step up to make a game. This time is no different. Furthermore, when you make a game for 30 million people, you're talking about such a vast number of play styles and opinions that all you can ever do is focus on doing the best work you possibly can.

★ Do you think the overwhelming popularity of the *Call Of Duty* franchise and the inevitable emulation of its formula are healthy for the industry?
The popularity of *Call Of Duty* – or the popularity of any other game, for that matter – is great for the industry, because among other things, it further establishes videogames as the art form that we all know that it is. With respect to *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II*, I have an incredibly talented team of developers, who are delivering our most innovative and creative work to date. Also collaborating with Treyarch is Trent Reznor and David Goyer, who look at games as a great form of expression. So we also now have critically acclaimed movie writers and composers that derive inspiration from games and vice versa. Anything that creates a healthier environment of creativity between various mediums will end up being good for the fans.

★★★

WHAT ABOUT Wii U? Black Ops II brings the goods for Nintendo's new hardware

■ TREYARCH HAS remained incredibly cagey about what exactly its announced support for the Wii U entails, but has at least hinted that it's excited about the potential the new console could have. "I can't get into the Wii U details because the Wii U monster will have my head," said Vonderhaar. "As a title that's getting worked on to go with the Wii U at launch, the relationship between Nintendo and Treyarch is nearly sacred, and it's really important all the information about the Wii U and *Black Ops* for the Wii U is developed and given to you in tandem."

Rafacz was a little more open during our interview. "We're always interested to see what the first-party is up to," he told us. "Taking a step back from just the Wii U – whether it's SmartGlass or what have you – we are always interested in exploring anything that can enhance the *Call Of Duty* experience. When you talk about fan expectations, I think it's fair to say that people come to the *Call Of Duty* experience with those, so anything that furthers that experience and remains true to the *Call Of Duty* universe, we're open to considering."



★ *Call Of Duty* multiplayer has come a long way from the straight deathmatch of the first games.

by your success or failure in these battlefields. Attempts to draw our interviewees on how deep this moulding of the plot will go is rewarded with reticent responses, but it's a likely guess that this is less a *Heavy Rain*-style webbing of narrative and one more akin to *Mass Effect 3*'s aesthetic choice of closing cinematics. Nevertheless, it still stands as a push into new and previously unexplored ideas in a series that has, in the past, stood resolutely by its 'one campaign for everyone' philosophy.

"I think we're doing the absolute right things with *Black Ops II*," says a confident Vonderhaar. "We have entirely new types of missions that are completely inspired by real-time strategy mechanics with the Strike Force missions, and that's in the campaign! If you look at multiplayer, then there's a huge stretch from combat training for new players all the way up to league play. There's all sorts of stuff in between. And now Zombies is almost a game by itself. I think we're doing all the right things to ensure that there's a huge range of experience. It has immense value for a game."

The changes to the multiplayer – however negligible to those who aren't interested in the series – are nevertheless hugely disruptive for the passionate fan. The decision to allow unlocks

> **"THERE'S THAT DEMAND FOR INNOVATION, AND THAT'S WHERE THE STRIKE FORCE MISSIONS COME IN"**

to remain unaffected upon Prestiging constitutes one such change, as does the decision to drop COD Points – although, arguably, their inclusion in *Black Ops* was as much of a challenging of assumptions as removing them.

Most disruptive, however, are the decisions to alter the create-a-class system – with players now able to tailor their setup with the Pick 10 mechanic – and the replacement of Killstreaks with Score Streaks. Both are undeniably beneficial, allowing players to focus on what they're good at rather than being forced to play in a particular way, but both also prove that Treyarch is considering nothing sacred when it comes to improving design.

"You're seeing all the fundamental assumptions about core gameplay systems just dumped on their head," says Vonderhaar. "There are some things in the game that work just like they did in our last game because when we looked at them they were still the best way we could do it, but then there are many more systems, like ranking and unlocking, where we looked at the design and wanted to do something beyond where we were last time. Not just because we could, but because it made sense for the game."

"I've come up against resistance on things we wanted to alter before, but in this case there was a lot of positive support," he continues. "Everyone felt that it was the right thing to do. It's all about experience. When you've been on a series as long as we have, it's just part of your bloodstream; it's part of your DNA. You live and breathe it every day of your life, and you can just feel what needs to be done based on being game makers. You can figure out how to extend, where to extend and how to go about doing that carefully. There might be this struggle about all these systems like Challenges and Contracts and which way to go, but you know the only way is to just go forward and take people with you. That's what we do."



IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO ARGUE THE FACT THAT TREYARCH KNOWS WHAT IT'S DOING, DEBATABLY EVEN MORE SO THAN THE ONCE-DOMINANT INFINITY WARD. *Black Ops II* looks polished to the nth degree, and wholly confident in the experience it intends to offer its players. The assumptions it's challenging aren't anything to do with it being a Hollywood-aping event of an experience, but rather the assumptions applied to the more deeply ingrained mechanics. From the inside out, Treyarch is fortifying the experience; tightening the nuts and bolts, fine-tuning the engine, knocking out the kinks with an eye on one thing and one thing only: what the *COD* player wants and needs. The company has no intention of detrimentally overhauling a core formula that's entertained millions across the world for the sake of needless strides into completely new genres. What else could we expect? For *Black Ops II* to become a full-blown MMO? A turn-based strategy game? A dating game? No, Treyarch knows it need react to no one's assumptions but the fans'.

Although, that isn't to say the company is ready to accept the fan base it has and rest on its laurels. "It's a popular game, you bet, but there's still growth there," says Vonderhaar. "So what if it's number one? We could put [an even larger] gap between us and anybody else if we acknowledge there's people who don't buy *Call Of Duty* for just multiplayer. Anybody who's not yet a *COD* gamer and we can make one… why not?"

"Treyarch's always had that culture where we just want to make better games every time," he says with a genuinely unaffected air of sincerity. "Who doesn't? There's nothing special about that."

THE FUTURE OF DEATHMATCH

EVER SINCE CALL OF DUTY 4 CHANGED THE RULES OF DEATHMATCH BY INTRODUCING ELEMENTS OF THE RPG GENRE, WE'VE SEEN THE MODE BECOME EVER MORE POPULAR ACROSS THE GLOBE. HOWEVER, THE DECISION THAT CHANGED COD FOREVER HAS ALSO COME AT THE EXPENSE OF FURTHER CREATIVITY, THE GENRE NOW SEEMINGLY CONTENT TO REPEAT THE SAME TRICKS AD INFINITUM. WHERE DOES COMPETITIVE SHOOTER GAMEPLAY GO FROM HERE? THE BRIGHTEST MINDS IN THE BUSINESS DISCUSS JUST THAT...

What do you think of the current state of the deathmatch in gaming?

Tim Willits: Make no mistake: we live in a *Call Of Duty* world. That paradigm of competitive deathmatch is definitely the dominant force out there, to such an extent that it influences gamers and developers. When you have 20 million people playing the same game, people's expectations of what they want and what they need in a multiplayer game is definitely driven in that direction. There is a juggernaut in the room that's difficult to get around.

Hasit Zala: I feel that multiplayer has not progressed creatively in quite a while. I guess when a franchise finds a formula that's incredibly popular it's always going to be hard to move audiences away from it, and while it's doing huge numbers it's hard to be too critical. My ambition is to create an accessible multiplayer with tactical squad gameplay. I want to see friends act effectively as squads where the unit is stronger than the individual and teamwork is rewarded. I want to back it up with a strong narrative fiction and provide persistent squad progression.

What new features can take it to the next level?

Jim Brown: We have more invested players today: people who are able to self-organise and form real teams – or clans or guilds or whatever you want to call them – and play more competitively. We should embrace that line of thinking before we lose the casual players entirely.

Daniel Berlin: I can only imagine a next generation of consoles and the possibility of supporting a multitude of signature systems such as environmental destruction, weather and wind, water and fire simulations, which can all work together in symbiosis. All of these systems working together could dynamically alter the flow and layout of the playing field. It could potentially change the way the deathmatch is played, even if the win conditions of the game mode remain the same.

Steven Lewis: I'd be interested to see how far multi-device connectivity could be pushed. We're starting to see it more and more now with technology like the Wii U, Xbox SmartGlass and the connectivity between the PS3 and PS Vita. Could I use a handheld, phone or tablet to actually join in with a multiplayer deathmatch while away from my console or PC? Due to control and timing differences it would probably need to be in a different capacity, such as providing air support, helping to build defences or relaying tactical information to friends, but it could really enhance the richness of the experience and also the feeling of teamwork.

David Vonderhaar: We have to do more to get competitive FPS games to where other fully competitive games have been in terms of their viewership and who participates. What better game than a *Call Of Duty* game to do that? It's already got mass appeal. That's why I'm really excited by the potential of [*Black Ops II*'s] eSports initiative between league play, casting and our live stream initiatives. Those three things are not just a step into that pool, but a headfirst dive. We're going to go for it. I really believe in this and it's a big part of what motivates me every single day.



★ When it comes to multiplayer, prototyping is key. "We build a lot of prototypes," says Vonderhaar. "I don't want to pare it down and make it sound like it's the only thing that we do, but quite often if an MP idea isn't fun immediately we yank it out and try something else."

If the FPS is to evolve through eSports, how do you encourage more players to get involved?

DV: You have to have a production around the sport, and that's what the casting feature is all about in *Black Ops II*. Take football. If it weren't on TV it wouldn't be nearly as successful as it is, right? You need it to be on TV, and you need *Call Of Duty* to have a mode where you can have it on TV.

You've also got to understand what it is that other games that are popular do, and that is that you can see both sides of the action. That's hard to do in an FPS, so we've put the map view in and a picture-in-picture view in. So



MAJOR PLAYERS

Introducing our panel of FPS experts

★★★

Tim Willits

★ Creative director and co-founder of id Software. Willits has worked across all of id's major game productions from *Doom* to *Rage*, and was a designer on the quintessential deathmatch shooter, *Quake III: Arena*. He is currently working on *Doom 4*.

Hasit Zala

★ A veteran member of Free Radical Design, Zala worked on all three *TimeSplitters* games and transitioned onto the *Crysis* series when the company was acquired by Crytek and transformed into Crytek UK in 2009. The Nottingham-based studio is currently designing the multiplayer for *Crysis 3* and overseeing development of *Homefront 2*.

Daniel Berlin

★ A multiplayer designer at Sweden's Massive Entertainment (known as Ubisoft Massive since 2008), Berlin cut his teeth on the *World In Conflict* series and is now working on the multiplayer modes for *Far Cry 3*.

Jim Brown

★ An Epic Games veteran with deathmatch development experience going back to *Unreal Tournament 2004*. Brown worked on all three *Gears Of War* titles and was a senior level designer on *Bulletstorm*. He's currently designing the Free For All mode for *Gears Of War: Judgment*.

Steven Lewis

★ Another Free Radical alumnus currently at Crytek UK, Lewis worked on *TimeSplitters: Future Perfect* and *Crysis 2* and is now on the teams for both *Crysis 3* and *Homefront 2*.

David Vonderhaar

★ Treyarch's game design director oversaw the multiplayer design on *Call Of Duty: World At War* as well as *Black Ops*. He's currently finishing off development on *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II* and tells us that he's in charge of all online content.

there are ways to do this; it just takes somebody who's crazy enough to go try it and do it. This game is crazy enough. And why not? I really, really think it's important to go and build a production around *Call Of Duty* and make it fun to watch the same way football is fun to watch. If it weren't as fun to watch it wouldn't be nearly as successful and popular. We wouldn't have kids playing football in the streets.



★ Although developers usually go for bigger and better, Brown says there's something to be said for smaller and more intimate too: "The smaller, more intimate experience allows individual players to strategise and control battles. They can be deeper, or more meaningful and personal."

But part of that is due to the personalities and superstars in football…

DV: There are definitely personalities [in gaming]. I've seen them and I've talked to them! It's up to us to make sure everybody knows about them. We have to put their name up in lights. We have to tell the world about these players; we have to tell people about Optic Rambo. When you have league play in the game, these teams – the ones who are really skilled – are going to bubble up. You're going to know who these guys are because there's only going to be a small percentage of them.

What could the next generation bring?

JB: I still remember looking back at some last-gen games and thinking to myself, 'This is it. Games couldn't look better than this. We'll never cross the uncanny valley.' Then I played the next game and it was better, and the next.

TW: I think if you have a theoretical, more advanced box, then you'll get your bigger worlds, more players, better-looking graphics and so on, but you'll stay on a path that is very predictable. Where you get the paradigm shifts in gaming is when you leverage that power to do something unique, whether it's through new controllers or second-screen devices – Microsoft has talked a lot about that. Bringing new things to the experience is what changes things.

The idea of smartphone apps complementing core games has been around for years, but it's been so slow to happen. Why is that?

JB: The idea is still in its infancy. This 'always-on gaming experience' is taking the industry into unpredictable waters. I don't think that anyone has hit the real magic here, but it's always getting more interesting. The real trick is making those interactions meaningful, not only to the individual players, but in terms of their relationship to the main game that they're playing and what impact or influence the 'always-on' experience has over the game as a whole.

DV: With regards to *Call Of Duty*, there are really interesting developments in gaming for those devices, but you have to find the right thing for *Call Of Duty*. Elite has lots of companion apps – with *Modern Warfare 3* you can modify your character class on your iPhone. You need the right idea, and something that makes sense. When we find the right thing, we'll do those things too.

HZ: This concept is something that I expect to see really take off. Mass spectator modes, large-scale gaming competitions – who knows, we could see eSports start to rival physical sports in viewer popularity once companies realise the potential audience figures.

DB: This is something that we wanted to push for *Far Cry 3*. Almost everyone I know owns a smartphone and a lot of the RPG elements of *FC3* multiplayer are all accessible on the web or through a smartphone app. People today are always connected, so, as a developer, we want to make sure that you can access our game even if you are not sitting in front of your PC or your couch. If you want to customise your character or decode intel and unlock powerful upgrades for the multiplayer section of *FC3*, you can do it through your phone or the web.

Story in deathmatch has always been a tricky proposition, but we've seen it attempted in games like *BioShock 2* and *Brink*. What's your take on it?

JB: This is an area where people are just starting to make great strides. Moving forwards, I'm absolutely certain that someone will find a creative way to present their game that will change the experience forever. Still, multiplayer tends to boil the gaming experience down to its core; you need to focus on making those basic mechanics fun first, and then you can expand out to experiment with ways to improve the story. Character relationships, story arcs and universe fictions don't matter if no one cares enough to play your game to begin with.

HZ: When so much creative work goes into franchise identity and gameplay differentiation then it only makes sense that the multiplayer world will become a seamless part of the overall fiction. There is an expectancy, certainly in my mind, that the traditional boundaries between single-player and multiplayer will be broken down. Why not have a campaign progression that has a seamless multiplayer and single-player experience?

TW: It's difficult to have a lot of story in competitive deathmatch. It really is, just because of the nature of how things shift and turn. Competitive deathmatch is competitive

"It's important to go and build a production around Call Of Duty and make it fun to watch the same way football is fun to watch"



★ "As long as people continue to add to the experience, as long as they continue to experiment and try new ideas, and as long as they keep playing and having fun, the trend of innovation will continue," says Brown.

deathmatch. It's more of a sport than it is a story. You'll likely find more single-player-based games have a multiplayer influence than you will the opposite.
DV: What we're doing is slowly seeping out the really strong practices from multiplayer back into the campaign experience. There's a lot of combat design in multiplayer, so we're seeing that feed back into the campaign. When you play the campaign of *Black Ops II*, you really will see how the multiplayer system's design is influencing the campaign side of things, rather than the story side necessarily influencing the multiplayer side. Will we ever see convergence in the opposite direction? It's got to happen organically or it will be wrong.

People are always looking for ways to make the deathmatch bigger. Do you think there's something to the idea of making it smaller, more intimate?

HZ: I think that this is an individual decision for each franchise to make. Some will go for a tactical implementation rather than a fast-paced arcade one. Large-scale, terrain-based vehicle combat versus intense infantry battles. I think there is room for all of these and more, so it's really down to the franchises' gameplay and what makes sense.
DB: That actually touches on one of the main design principles. When designing the core gameplay for *FC3* multiplayer we really wanted to feature a tighter type of action where you fight together with your team-mates, not just beside them. For us, this meant that we wanted to keep players within close proximity of each other. The incentive is given through the way we've balanced the game. For example, you won't gain access to the powerful off-map support by executing killstreaks. We didn't want to reward getting lots of kills by giving a tool that gives even more kills. We wanted to give those tools to the player that helps his team-mates. So the player who shines in teamplay will be the player that gets to drop a barrel bomb on the enemy. We also designed the respawning system to make sure you spawn close to clusters of team-mates. This ensures that the player does not have to jump through hoops to reach his team-mates, and when he is within the group he wants to stay there. So, for us, bigger is not always more epic. It's rather a matter of identifying the gameplay you want to create then making sure that every feature works towards achieving that goal. Then you can build from there, depending on your resources.

Call Of Duty reinvigorated multiplayer with RPG elements. Will we continue to see such transformations in future?

DV: Absolutely. As soon as we figure out the best way to do them then we probably will. I love genre-blending, and I think a lot of developers in Treyarch would agree. I mean, why not? If it makes sense for the game and it's fun, does it really matter? As a game maker, you find influence everywhere – in other games, in other genres, in TV and media and sports and books. Whatever it takes to find something that can create a great experience for gamers.
JB: One of the exciting things about games is that they're so hard to pin down and box into a nice descriptive package. RPG, FPS, MMO… They're all great labels but none are really adequate any more. Indie games in particular are making a huge leap to redefine what types of experiences can actually be called games, and successful or not, each new idea helps expand the tools and tricks available to the next person who's making a game.
TW: There are always opportunities to make the game a new experience. Look at *Minecraft*: that allows you to build as you play – one of the reasons that *Quake* had such long legs is that there was such a thriving community of people that made stuff, and you could play within the world that you made with other people. Savvy developers who look at leveraging different game types in that way could really succeed. To be able to take advantage of possibilities like that really makes the future exciting.


★ Games like *Dust 514* are painting an interesting future for the genre, creating a hybrid of MMO and FPS that, if successful, could have a huge influence on the way designers approach the deathmatch.

Will we see the death of the single-player-only game in coming years?

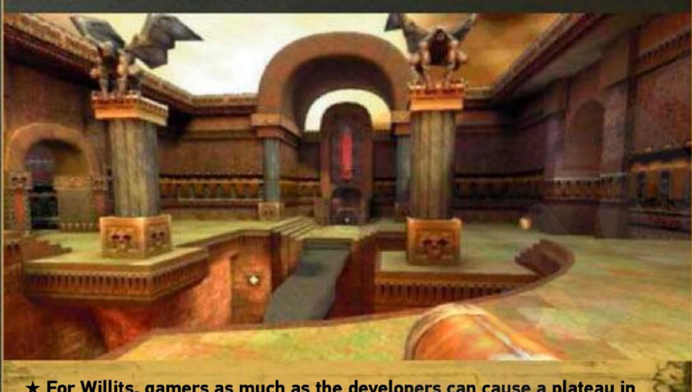
JB: Absolutely not. Not everyone has access to online services, and not everyone enjoys multiplayer or deathmatch. I know more people who have invested hundreds of hours in single-player RPGs than have invested hundreds of hours in online multiplayer games. Also, as time progresses, the current trends are actually more about co-operative or asynchronous play in bite-sized increments rather than organised competitive multiplayer. Everything has its place.

Is deathmatch shoehorned into too many games that simply don't need it, to the detriment of those games?

TW: That's a tough thing to answer because… well, *Rage*! It didn't really need on-foot deathmatch, but man we got crap for not having it. So it's easy to say yes, that too many games have competitive on-foot deathmatch, but then people will turn around and yell at you for not having it! [laughs] It's a tough call. In some games it does feel a little bit forced in, but you know what? Put it in; try something new. It could catch on! I applaud developers for at least taking a risk because you're never going to get change if you're not trying for it.
SL: There have definitely been instances of titles that clearly didn't need it, and clearly didn't suit it. In this regard I think it's the developers and publishers who are losing out because they're investing people, time and money into a component of their games that just doesn't strike a chord with the audience. Development costs could be significantly reduced, or refocused, if multiplayer wasn't a 'tick box' feature.

Finally, what does the deathmatch need to do to stay relevant?

TW: Developers need to remember that there are core elements that you must have in your game. You must have those exciting moments, whether it's the headshot or the cool melee, or the tactile sense of how the controls work and how it feels to shoot a weapon. You need to focus on those elements. You can build on top of those and have the crazy features like XP or RTS elements, but developers cannot get so fixated on some new feature that they forget that, at the core, running around and shooting your buddies is fun. That has to be answered before anything else can come into play and be successful.


★ For Willits, gamers as much as the developers can cause a plateau in creativity. "Gamers will tell you that they want something new, but they don't know what they want, and they're very comfortable and familiar with what they have. They don't know what they want until you give it to them."

POKÉ MAS



TAKAO UNNO

Pokémon developer Game Freak isn't exactly known for its openness, so when an opportunity came up to speak with two of its most experienced staff, games™ jumped at the chance. Following the release of Pokémon Black and White Version 2, game directors Takao Unno and Junichi Masuda joined us to discuss what it's really like to work inside the house that Pikachu built...



ÉMON TERS

JUNICHI MASUDA

Now in its 23rd year, Tokyo-based *Pokémon* developer Game Freak is a veteran of the Japanese games industry, having worked across five generations of hardware and just as many core *Pokémon* titles. Yet it is also one of the slowest developers to, ironically enough, evolve.

As the games industry has moved from one gameplay trend to another and as gaming technology has advanced in leaps and bounds, *Pokémon* has remained a constant throughout. Its iterations are, famously, just that: iterative improvements upon a proven formula, each bringing only gradual refinements to the visuals. Unsurprisingly, then, many of the original staff of Game Freak, which started out as a fanzine before moving into development, remain at the company. One of those founding members is Junichi Masuda, who joins **games™** for a chat just days before the release of *Pokémon Black* and *White Version 2*.

Masuda tells us that he joined Game Freak "before it was even an entity" and met *Pokémon* mastermind Satoshi Tajiri during development of the group's first game, *Quinty*, created for the Famicom in 1989 and released on the NES a year later as *Mendel Palace*. Masuda affectionately refers to *Quinty* as an "indie" game, giving some insight into the garage development culture of Game Freak's earliest years. "One of my lasting memories is working in a team of just nine people," he says of the years spent creating the original *Pokémon Red/Green* for the Game Boy. "*Red* and *Green* took six years to make, and because the team was so small we all had to muck in and do different things. I programmed the game and contributed ideas, as well as producing all of the music. Compared to now, where everyone has more defined roles, it was a case of everyone doing all kinds of things to get the game made."

Masuda appears to believe that this indie sensibility has been diluted over the years as Game Freak has grown in size, but he has never worked for another developer, so his frame of reference is a little one-sided. Takao Unno, his co-director on *Black/White Version 2*, however, worked at a

"There are less strict orders within each role, so everyone gives their opinion and does things that may not be in their job description"



number of developers before joining Game Freak during the production of *Pokémon Ruby* and *Sapphire* on the GBA.

Unno tells us he immediately fell in love with *Pokémon* when he saw Venusaur on the packaging of *Pokémon Green* in 1996. He bought the game there and then and eventually became a graphic designer in videogames. Typical Japanese fealty prevents Unno from disclosing which developers he worked at before Game Freak, though cursory research indicates he worked at little-known Japanese developer Pixel and created the graphics for one of its best games, the Saturn strategy RPG *Farland Saga*. "I've found that at Game Freak there is a much fresher, more organic approach to creating games," Unno says when asked to compare his current employer to previous experiences. "There are less strict orders within each role, so everyone gives their opinion and does things that may not be in their job description. Compared to other companies where everyone had set roles and worked on their specific task, it's a lot more organic at Game Freak. I found that refreshing."

From its fanzine origins, through its indie development phase and right up to the present day, sheltered by the strength of the *Pokémon* brand and its strong ties to Nintendo, Game Freak nevertheless retains its refreshing company culture. Visiting the developer's offices in 2011, **games™** found a studio unlike any other. Its reception is a single unmanned desk and telephone in an almost pitch black room, illuminated only by the phosphorous glow of

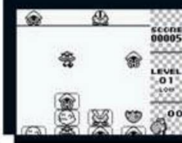
Gotta Play 'Em All

Game Freak has made more than just Pokémon games, and they're not all on Nintendo systems…



Mendel Palace
1989, NES

■ Game Freak's first title is a quirky action-puzzle game that sees you flipping over floor tiles to trap or destroy evil dolls that roam the screen. Game Freak founder Satoshi Tajiri taught himself to create games by reverse-engineering the Famicom, and *Mendel Palace*, known in Japan as *Quinty*, took two years to finish as a result.



Mario & Yoshi
1991, Game Boy/NES

■ Simply titled *Yoshi* in Japan, this puzzler was the first to star the eponymous dinosaur following his debut in *Super Mario World*. A fairly decent game in which *Super Mario* power-ups are trapped between two egg shells, *Mario & Yoshi* was nevertheless overlooked on a console flooded with great puzzle games.



Smart Ball
1992, SNES

■ Though published by Sony and developed by 'System Sacom', a look at the credits show that it was outsourced to Game Freak and created by Satoshi Tajiri and Ken Sugimori. It's also notable as one of the earliest games to feature music by *Silent Hill* composer Akira Yamaoka. As for the game itself, it's reminiscent of *A Boy And His Blob*.



Magical Taruruto
1992, Mega Drive

■ Based on a popular boy's manga of the time, *Magical Taruruto* was a platform game about a schoolboy who calls upon a friend from another dimension to protect him from bullies. A number of *Magical Taruruto* games were produced in the Nineties, but this is the only one made by Game Freak.



Mario & Wario
1993, Super Famicom

■ Game Freak's second *Mario*-themed puzzle game was much better and featured an auto-walking Mario, blinded by a bucket on his head. Players used Nintendo's mouse to manipulate the world around Mario and guide him to safety. It's a little bit *Lemmings* in style and almost certainly influenced *Mario vs Donkey Kong*.



Pulseman
1994, Mega Drive

■ In the list of non-*Pokémon* Game Freak games, *Pulseman* easily makes it into the top three. This action-platformer has the look, sound and pace of the best games on the Mega Drive and feels like the output of Treasure, Konami or Sega. The Western version was only on the Sega Channel service but has since been re-released on Wii Virtual Console.

a wall-mounted Game Freak logo, while several meeting rooms decorated in unusual ways, from tropical jungle settings to a pretend kids' bedroom, evoke a sense of playfulness found in few other development studios. It's certainly not something that could be described as down to earth, but 'unconventional', 'indie', 'organic' and, yes, 'refreshing' would certainly be suitable descriptors.

Game Freak does things its own way, and not even Nintendo can put pressure on the developer to change that. So while many gamers would love to see a proper *Pokémon* game developed for home consoles, taking advantage of modern 3D graphics, it's not likely to happen any time soon. The series hasn't even graduated to the 3DS yet, Game Freak preferring the familiarity and world-beating install base of the now eight-year-old DS for *Black* and *White Version 2*.

"I see *Pokémon* as a communication tool," says Masuda when we ask him why the series has stuck so closely to handheld gaming systems. "If you interact with another player, battle or trade, you expand the world of *Pokémon* into the real world. You do the same thing if you converse on it. So the best way of doing that is on a handheld." Furthermore, he defends the slowly evolving game design as a consequence of sticking closely to staple parts of the game's identity. "Once a game is completed," he says, "Game Freak always takes apart the constituent parts of a game and tests them. And at that point we might lose a part of the game. For example, the act of capturing a Pokémon, or the Pokédex or the Poké Ball itself. From that, it's easy to understand that you can't



"Red and Green took six years to make, and because the team was so small we all had to muck in and do different things"



Kuru Kuru Puzzle
1994, Game Boy/ Super Famicom
■ Far from Game Freak's high point, this puzzle game was produced for Victor Interactive Software and is almost exactly the same as *Mario & Yoshi*, only with the puzzle pieces replaced by animals and food items. It's a little bit like Sega's *Baku Baku Animal*, released in 1995, but not as good.



Bazaar De Gosaru No Game De Gosaru
1996, PC Engine
■ Another *Lemmings*-style puzzle game, this PC Engine CD release differs from both that and *Mario & Wario* in that the main character, in this case a monkey, must have all of its commands programmed in before it starts to walk. Despite appearances, levels can be solved in many different ways.



Bushi Seiryuden: Futari No Yusha
1997, Super Famicom
■ An obscure RPG with an unusual battle system. Each fight changes to a side-on perspective and takes place in a series of real-time commands divided into a set number of turns. Win a battle below that number of turns and you accrue energy that has an effect on the story, even changing the ending.



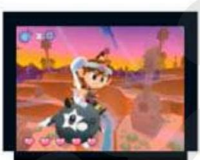
Game Boy Camera
1998, Game Boy
■ A quirky technological innovation that turned the ageing Game Boy into a digital camera, which featured a handful of in-built games as well as the option to make and print your own stickers using an optional thermal printer. *Pokémon* appeared in the game in the form of cut-outs to be placed into photos.



Click Medic
1999, PlayStation
■ An anime adventure that put you in the shoes of a hospital surgeon, *Click Medic* was the *Trauma Center* of its day, but not quite as much fun. Published by Sony Music, this was one of the more experimental PlayStation games and never made it to the West. It is also the last game by Game Freak to be developed for a non-Nintendo system.



Drill Dozer
2005, Game Boy Advance
■ Released late in the GBA's life, after the release of the DS, *Drill Dozer* never really got the attention it deserved. An accomplished and original action game, it saw you drilling your way through a number of huge stages, packed with secret areas. It's the Game Freak title that benefits the most from the Nintendo influence.



Rhythm Hunter: HarmoKnight
2012, 3DS
■ Game Freak's latest title is a wonderful little platform game that plays a bit like an auto-runner iPhone game and features notes that must be collected along the way. Like similar stages in *Super Mario Galaxy*, collected notes form a tune in real-time. Bonus stages feature *Pokémon* music too.

lose certain elements. Because of that, some of the core elements have never changed. Another reason is that the structure of the game itself has a very strong identity. It's not a character-based game. It has its engines and its systems, and that's a very prominent part of the game. That's why it hasn't really changed."

It's funny that Masuda should mention systems. One of the biggest myths surrounding *Pokémon* is that it is only a children's game. It's easy to see why, with so many merchandising deals and an anime series that has run continuously since 1997, but the videogame itself is one of the most complex RPGs ever created and truly deserves its place in the pantheon of great hardcore videogames. Scratch beneath the surface, in fact, and you might find it too complicated. A hardcore contingent of *Pokémon* players has spent years mastering the breeding of Pocket Monsters and has tirelessly written strategies and spreadsheets designed to help breed the very best teams for competitive play. It's one of the most inaccessible niches in gaming and one we've always assumed had sprung up by accident, yet Game Freak does, in fact, design each game with these players in mind. "The developers at Game Freak also go to the Day Care Center and try to breed the best Pokémon possible," says Masuda, finally sucking air in through his teeth when we ask how difficult it is to design a game with such in-depth mechanics below the surface of an otherwise accessible adventure. Yet for all its complexity, he also concedes that the success of *Pokémon* is made possible by getting a new generation of players interested with every iteration.

"There is an emphasis on catering to new players," says Masuda. "That's evident in the fact that every new game has an explanation of how to catch a Pokémon. That wouldn't be necessary if the game was just for people who have been there from the start. But at the same time, there are certain features such as the Pokémon World Tournament or the Battle Tower that cater toward advanced players. You can explore certain other places from previous games too. So there is this dual emphasis on the new generation of players, as well as those who have been playing from a young age."

Perhaps this is why each new *Pokémon* title has essentially shunned all continuity, setting each game in a new world, with a new set of characters and monsters. Only now, 16 years on from the original, has Game Freak created a true sequel in the form of *Pokémon Black* and *White Version 2*. "There are quite a number of reasons why there is a number two in the title," says Masuda. "When Game Freak finished making *Black* and *White*, there was this feeling that we wanted to make a sequel and it was going to be set in a world two years after the story of *Black* and *White* ended." Unno adds: "There's the fact that it's a sequel, but there's also the fact that there's a different starting point and a different character. Being able to



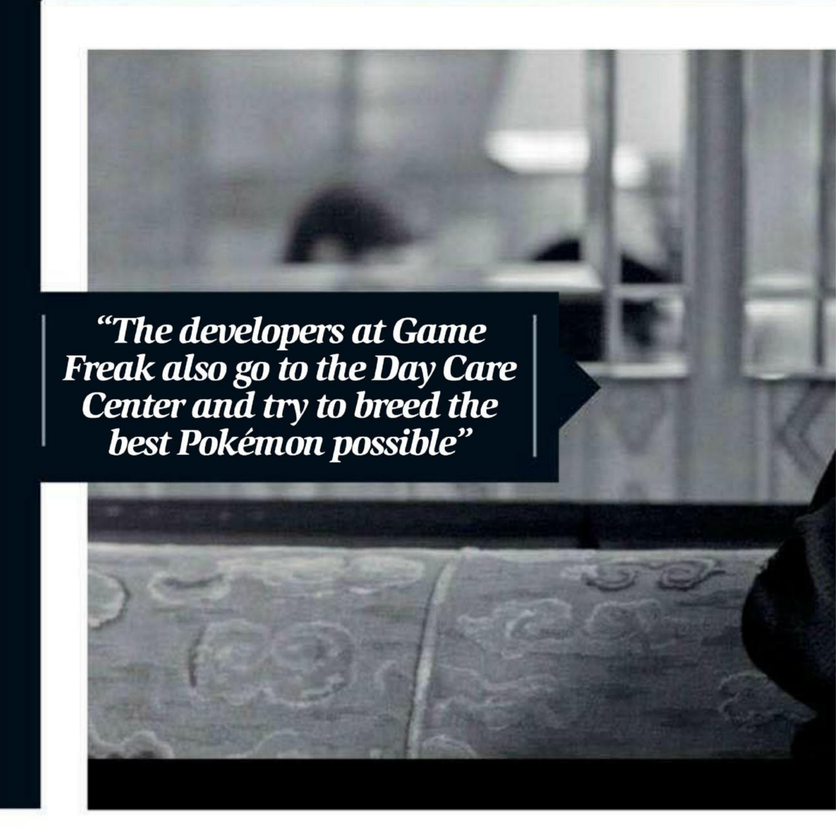
■ The reception of *HarmoKnight* from those with access to the Japanese eShop has been positive. We hope to see it on our shores.

How To Design A Pokémon

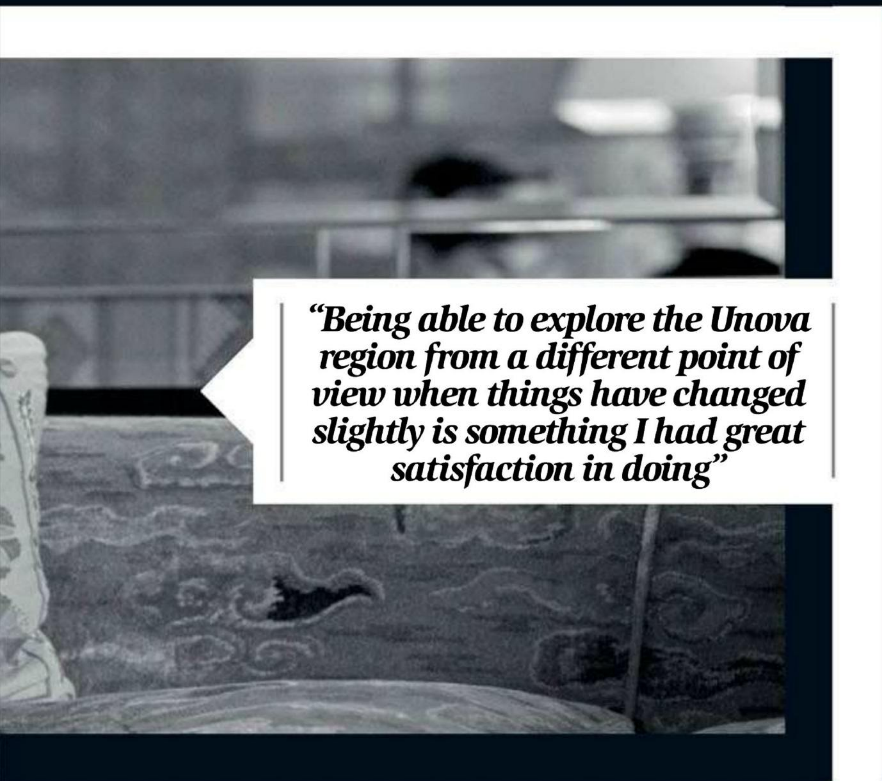
Pokémon designer Takao Unno walks us through the process of designing Pokémon Black and White monsters Pansage, Pansear and Panpour

■ "When designing something, I take the era into account. That's always important… Whatever the prevailing winds are in that era. What's popular? I ask myself, what is it? Where does it live? How does it interact with humans? These kind of things come into consideration.

"The original concept for Panpour, Pansear and Pansage is



"The developers at Game Freak also go to the Day Care Center and try to breed the best Pokémon possible"



> **"Being able to explore the Unova region from a different point of view when things have changed slightly is something I had great satisfaction in doing"**

that they were restaurant helpers. So they were helping the three gym leaders in the restaurant. So what would they be doing there? Maybe they're waiters or they're helping in some way. In my first concept for them, they were ghost-like, but that wasn't particularly practical because they'd need hands and feet to do their job. So we gave them hands and we made their hands like mittens so that they're like oven gloves. Also, the grass type Pokémon, Pansage, has tasty herbs on his head; the water type, Panpour, has fresh water; and the fire type, Pansear, has fire for heating up. So all three represent the basic components of cookery. There's a lot of thought behind the context. How do they interact with humans? What are they doing? There's a lot of thinking behind those designs."



explore the Unova region from a different point of view when things have changed slightly is something I had great satisfaction in doing."

As **games™**'s review concluded last issue, *Black* and *White Version 2* may be iterative, but they add as much new content as you'd expect from a sequel and take their place as the best *Pokémon* games yet. But it's also difficult to ignore the fact that, including GBC remakes *HeartGold* and *SoulSilver*, this is the fourth proper pair of *Pokémon* games to appear on the DS, and perhaps it's time for Game Freak to do something else. Which, of course, it just did…

Yep. Game Freak does occasionally make a game that doesn't have *Pokémon* in the title, though it's been pretty busy this generation and hasn't produced anything original since 2005's GBA platformer *Drill Dozer*. The new title – currently only available in Japan – is *Rhythm Hunter: HarmoKnight*, a 3DS eShop title that blends rhythm-action gameplay with platforming, keying into Masuda's background as a composer.

"It is harder to create new games than it used to be," he admits. "Maybe that's because the hardware is more complex, so it takes longer. Or, because of the sheer volume of games around now, it's more difficult to be original and there's a danger of being derivative of something."

"We've made a number of games that haven't been released," he reveals, "but *HarmoKnight* has just come out in Japan and it's the first we've done in a while. Much like the *Red* and *Blue* version of *Pokémon*, it's quite a small project, maybe a few more than nine people, but we still had people taking on multiple roles in development."

By all accounts, *Rhythm Hunter: HarmoKnight* is a terrific game and a worthy addition to Nintendo's growing list of eShop exclusives, but at the time of writing there's no indication that it will ever make it to Europe. We made sure to ask Game Freak if we should expect it, of course, but the team deftly sidestepped the question and managed not to answer either way. We shouldn't be surprised, really. Before attending the interview, Nintendo provided **games™** with a lengthy list of topics we were and weren't allowed to discuss. One of the stipulations was that we strictly weren't allowed to ask about any future *Pokémon* titles – completely ruining our plans to demand a *Pokémon* MMO – so it was surprising when Masuda used the discussion about *HarmoKnight* to drop hints about the next *Pokémon* game. "The method of development and the inspiration behind *HarmoKnight* is something we'd like to apply to future *Pokémon* titles," he says. "We've learned a lot that will be applied to *Pokémon*."

And before we can ask what he could possibly mean by that, the interview is over. We'll just have to wait for the next game to find out the truth, we suppose, but at the rate Game Freak has been creating *Pokémon* titles recently, we suspect we won't have to wait that long.

■ Masuda claims lessons have been learnt on *HarmoKnight* that can be applied to future *Pokémon*. We're interested to see where.


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"We're not very keen on making money"

IN THIS SPECIAL FEATURE, GAMES™ SITS DOWN WITH MASATO MAEGAWA, CEO OF THE ORIGINAL INDEPENDENT DEVELOPER TREASURE, TO DISCUSS 20 YEARS OF GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Here's a fun experiment: rattle a tree and see how many indie developers fall out. Chances are there'll be a bunch. We live in an era where the indie development scene is thriving like never before. All manner of cutting edge and retro games fill the market, rife with innovation and new ideas, and often make millionaires – seemingly overnight – out of the most unlikely suspects. But before the new wave of indie game development, there was the little studio that could: Treasure. True mavericks of the industry, the core team that founded Treasure, led by Masato Maegawa, was once part of Konami's development studios, having worked on games like *Contra*, *Castlevania* and *Axelay*. In Japan, it was often understood that employees would stay with one company for life, an antiquated yet nonetheless accurate notion at the time. So for Maegawa and company to up and leave one of the most successful third-party publishers to form their own studio because they didn't want to get trapped in an endless loop of producing sequels… Well, that is what truly makes a developer independent.

Founded in 1992, Treasure is now celebrating its 20th anniversary. In that time it has created dozens of games; usually highly regarded action games developed with surprisingly small teams, often requiring no more than three or four staff to create a game. Efforts like *Gunstar Heroes*, *Guardian Heroes*, *Radiant Silvergun*, *Ikaruga* and *Sin And Punishment* number among its creations. In the spirit of the original indie developer, we met up with Treasure founder Masato Maegawa at the Shinjuku-based studio to sit down and talk with him about his company's history, his insights on today's increasingly social gaming scene, and the challenges of remaining profitable and relevant in the face of shifting trends. If anything, we found Maegawa to be refreshingly frank with regard to Treasure's unflinching approach to modern game development.

Having recently ported its two greatest Sega Saturn classics to Xbox Live Arcade, Treasure's *Guardian Heroes* and, perhaps more significantly, *Radiant Silvergun* are finally available to the masses in both original and updated flavours. While many have experienced the beat-'em-up glory of *Guardian Heroes* – a precursor to the similar delight of The Behemoth's *Castle Crashers* – few Western gamers have been able to sample the wonder of *Radiant Silvergun*, a Japan-only game that came too late in the Sega Saturn's life to make a commercial impact. Now that these games have finally been resurrected, we ask Maegawa what the motivation was to bring them back now.

"We wanted to get a lot of people to play games like *Radiant Silvergun* and *Guardian Heroes*, because the market exposure was very short for Sega Saturn," he tells us. "So few people could play the games then, so it's an opportunity for fans who like shooters and action games to discover these. It's a very good opportunity for us." Regarding the difficulty of



converting these Saturn games to the Xbox 360, he says: "The porting itself is very easy. But the graphics… It takes time to make the game system more user-friendly. It takes just three months to port the game from the programming side, but we had to take the graphics and convert them into high-res. So it took a year to upgrade the visuals."

■ *Sin And Punishment* garnered enough of a cult following for its Wii sequel to get a Western release.

Interestingly, the majority of the feedback regarding the new versions of these games comes from the long-standing Treasure fans. Maegawa explains: "Unfortunately, we don't hear much from new users, but from the old fans we hear they are very excited. The first reason we made *Radiant Silvergun* and *Guardian Heroes* for XBLA is that the old fans wanted us to port these to Xbox 360 because they don't have Saturns any more, so they are very happy about that. However, we don't really know what the newer users think of the game." Don't hold out hope for PS Vita, PSN or even 3DS ports of these games, though. We have it on good authority that the 360 conversions were actually instigated by Microsoft Japan brass, who were fans of the games and suggested that Treasure develop them for the Xbox.

Regarding the *Castle Crashers* comparison, it isn't the first time Maegawa has heard the two games mentioned in the same breath. "*Castle Crashers* is a very good game and it was a very big hit, so publishers want us to make the same sort of game," he admits. But *Guardian Heroes* is like *Castle Crashers*, basically, so instead of making an entirely new game, it made more sense to port *Guardian Heroes* for the new generation."

With social and mobile gaming on the rise and claiming such a huge portion of the modern gamer's budget, we ask Maegawa whether he envisioned Treasure following a similar path as Cave, which was experienced success with iOS versions of some of its biggest shooter hits, like *DoDonPachi* and *Mushihimesama*. "Well, actually we are thinking about starting a new project for iPad and iPhone," he teases. "But Cave games are very suited for iPad, because you just use one finger to move and shoot. But our games are a little more difficult, because they're more complex – *Radiant Silvergun* has many weapon types and *Ikaruga* requires switching between black and white – so we have to think about the user interface. We need a wireless control pad for iPad, then it would be easier for us."



■ *Guardian Heroes*' Saturn-exclusive release and gorgeous hand-drawn animation typifies Treasure's hardcore action slant.

During our conversation, the topic of indie gaming comes up, and with our favourite hobby transforming perhaps faster than we'd like, we ask whether Treasure will ever adopt a download-only strategy, making smaller games for a low price point via digital distribution. Reassuringly, Maegawa confides: "The situation of the indie scene now is a good thing, but we'd rather stick to console development than download-only or mobile games. Our first priority is to make the games we want to make and that the users want. This is our first priority. We don't care about the hardware or if it's indie or it's a big game. If we can make a good game, the hardware itself doesn't matter."

While such a rigid philosophy is admirable, the whims of the developer don't always jibe with the demands of the publisher. How does Treasure adapt to an era where the tentpoles of every publisher's development guidelines demand things like online multiplayer, social connectivity and a DLC strategy? It's not easy, explains Treasure's CEO: "As you say, a lot of publishers want us to make multiplatform games, and especially social games. But for us, it's not very ideal, because we'd like to make a game for just one platform at a time. We especially don't like to make social games. Multiplayer, of course, we support, but we don't want to make the sort of money-generating games like GREE makes. They're not very good.

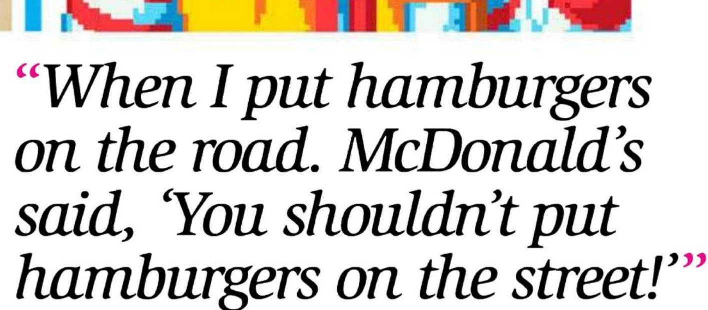
"We're not very keen on making money," he laughs. "We just want to make games."

It's not surprising, then, that Maegawa imagines that Treasure's audience is made up





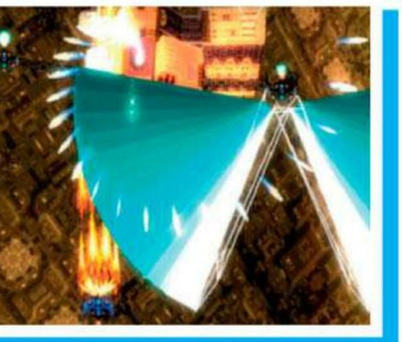
■ A McDonald's platformer provided an unlikely starting point for Treasure.



"When I put hamburgers on the road. McDonald's said, 'You shouldn't put hamburgers on the street!'"



primarily of core gamers. Its most popular game in terms of sales has been *Guardian Heroes*, while its most famous game is *Ikaruga*. It must be difficult for a company when you're more than a decade removed from your most financially successful game, which brings to mind its most recent bigger-budget releases, like the Wii's *Sin And Punishment: Successor Of The Skies*, which was a modest sales success at best. Maegawa reminisces about the unexpected reactions to the game: "*Sin And Punishment 2* was reviewed very well and has a good reputation, but it didn't sell too well. The first game was set in the 'Ruffian' world, and a lot of users loved that better than the sophisticated setting of the second game."



■ The XBLA version of *Radiant Silvergun* has been a boon for people who didn't fancy spending hundreds on a Saturn copy.

Reaching into Treasure's past, we bring up perhaps its most surreal game: *McDonald's Treasure Land Adventure*. In this game, you take control of Ronald McDonald himself and collect burgers, jump on platforms and fight aliens, of all things. This was, in fact, supposed to be Treasure's first game, but cooler heads prevailed, allowing it to debut with *Gunstar Heroes* instead. "I made [*McDonald's Treasure Land Adventure*] myself," Maegawa explains. "I was the main programmer, and I made the game almost completely by myself. Sega approached me to make the game. We had just started the company, Treasure, and we had a presentation of *Gunstar Heroes* – a very original game – but [Sega] didn't like it."

Stunned by this revelation, we encourage him to continue. "Yes," he says. "The Sega people didn't like *Gunstar Heroes*, so they asked us to make the McDonald's game, so I made it first, but I said we'll only do this if you release *Gunstar Heroes* first, which they finally agreed to, so we won. [laughs] Those were very good days. Of course, there were some restrictions, like the McDonald's characters couldn't do any harm."

Maegawa also ran into a spot of trouble when he put hamburgers on the street for players to collect. "When I put hamburgers on the road," he says, "McDonald's said we couldn't do that, so they deleted that. So, instead of hamburgers I replaced them with rings. McDonald's said, 'You shouldn't put hamburgers on the street!'"

The industry has changed a lot over the last 20 years, and running a company is a full-time job, so Maegawa doesn't do any coding himself any more. But he still keeps his teams lean and active. "If I'm going to make original games that I want to make, it's difficult to do this with big groups. It's best to have small teams make these kinds of games. If you have a big project with lots of people, you can't control the results." The increasing complexity of today's consoles and the need for teams filled with project managers, producers, artists, designers and musicians becomes an ever-increasing burden on small developers like Treasure.

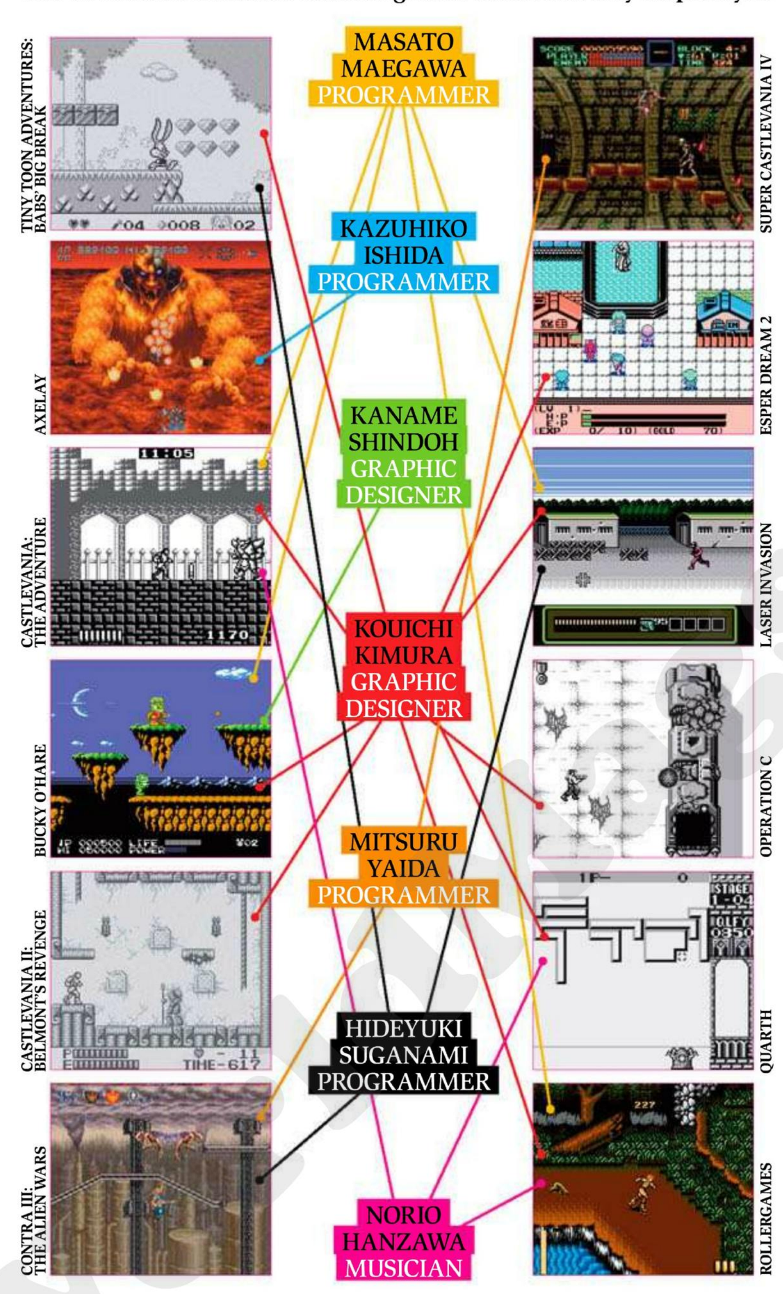
"Yeah, it's tough and we're really pushing the limit," Maegawa admits. "But, if we took a large number of staff on to a project, everything would be different and we couldn't do what we do now. Treasure games are made by small teams, so the quality is guaranteed by keeping a low number of people on the project."

The small stature of today's handhelds doesn't really provide as much of an oasis as you might expect, either. "Nintendo's DS and Wii hardware are actually challenging to develop for precisely because the hardware specs are so low," he explains. "The complexity of



The Secret Origins Of Treasure

We all know that Treasure's founding members previously worked at Konami. But which Konami games did they work on, and which of those can we consider unofficial Treasure games? The results may surprise you



Dreamakes

Treasure's modern business model mostly seems to be about ports and remakes. With that in mind, here are the top five Treasure games we'd love to see remade for modern systems

RAKUGAKI SHOWTIME [Wii U]



THIS LONG-FORGOTTEN PSone game was a lot like *Power Stone*, only with gorgeous, crayon-drawn, paper-cutout characters. One of its most unusual features was the 'God Hand', a *Duck Amuck*-style illustrator's hand that would appear on-screen and draw in hazards or power-ups. On the Wii U, the God Hand could potentially be player-controlled on the touch screen of the GamePad, while four other players battle it out with Wii Remotes.

SIN AND PUNISHMENT [3DS]



THE RECENT Wii sequel reignited interest in the series, but it's the Japan-only N64 original that remains the best, if only for the incredible naval assault stage that took the on-rails shooter into such extreme territory that it made everything else look dull. *Kid Icarus: Uprising* has proved that the 3DS works brilliantly with this genre, so a slightly more graphically impressive version of this astonishing game would be more than welcome.

FREAK OUT [PS Vita]



THIS EARLY PS2 game tried to entertain players by allowing them to pinch, stretch and twang other characters and the world around them pretty much just for the joy of seeing what would happen as they bounced around the 3D environment. The game seemed pointless to many at the time, but in a post-*Katamari* industry it could take on a new lease on life. The quirky-friendly PS Vita and its physical pinching controls would be the perfect home for a more goal-oriented remake.

ASTRO BOY: OMEGA FACTOR [XBLA/PSN]

A CO-DEVELOPMENT between Treasure and Sega, this licensed GBA game captured the spirit of Treasure's early Mega Drive games with fast, robust action and some inventive stage design. Being able to hit enemies and bounce them around the screen was a particularly joyful touch. An XBLA/PSN port would be wonderful. But none of those flat, 'improved' HD visuals, please. We'd want even more pixels on screen than ever before. Something like the *Scott Pilgrim vs The World* game; a celebration of retro awesomeness.

GRADIUS V [iPAD]



WE ALREADY know that Treasure is considering iOS ports of its shooters but is concerned about control issues on the touch screen. *Ikaruga* and *Radiant Silvergun* may be a little too complicated to work, but the relatively simple *Gradius V* could be pulled off and would look stunning on the new iPad's Retina display.

the hardware doesn't really make it any harder to develop for. Once a system has reached the complexity of where the Xbox 360 is, making it more or less powerful doesn't really change the complexity of the game development itself."

However, pointing to a 3DS dev kit in the room, Maegawa clarifies, "We are very keen on developing on 3DS." When pressed on whether he just wants to put his action games on the 3DS, or if he plans to cater to the system's strengths, he says: "We think about how to take advantage of the 3D. The only difference between 2D and 3D games is whether you use sprites or polygons, so a 3D game can be made into a 2D game. So it's not a preference of 2D or 3D; it's the quality of the game itself. But my preference is 2D. It's hard to preserve the quality of the game when you make it completely in 3D."

During the course of our conversation, it comes up that Maegawa himself doesn't play a lot of games, but he has played quite a bit of the latest *Pokémon*, and he reveals that his team really loves playing games on the Xbox 360, which leads us to our next inquiry: who comes up with the game concepts at Treasure, and are there any genres it won't touch? "It happens both ways," he says. "Sometimes publishers come to us for ideas and sometimes we approach publishers. As long as we get to make the games that we want to make, it doesn't matter who starts the conversation.

"I don't have a preference for which genre to develop. It can be anything. But we don't make games that I want to create. We make games that my staff wants to make. It's not like I personally limit the concepts to action and shooting. It's what my staff comes up with." So if someone wanted to make a racing game? "Of course we'd do it," he agrees.

> *"We want to make games that we want to play. Too many people are focused on just making money"*

Of the staff that first formed Treasure, including Maegawa, there remain four members. Atsutomo Nakagawa, a Sega veteran who was the force behind *Ikaruga* but wasn't there at the beginning, is also still with the studio, keeping the purity of the Treasure vision alive. Maegawa's vision for the future of Treasure could be viewed by some as either brave or foolhardy, but we like his fighting spirit. "Recently, the market of game development has very much changed," he opines. "Some [developers] go to the mobile market, and a lot of people say we won't make money in consumer gaming, but we want to stick to consumer gaming. So if the world changes, we will be the last ones to make consumer games. We want to make games that we want to play. Too many people are focused on just making money. But making money isn't our focus. We want to make fun games."

Naturally, Maegawa is fine with the occasional success, but it's not what drives his company. If they had a slogan, it might read: 'Treasure: Still Treasure'. "We don't have to change because a lot of developers are leaving the consumer market," he says. "So while the situation has changed, that doesn't mean the consumer market will disappear. There's still a consumer market; it may be small, but if everyone else leaves there's more for us who remain."

Regarding plans for the future, Maegawa lets us in on a little-known scoop: "We are making a new game on Nintendo 3DS now. Not multiplatform, but exclusive to 3DS." But is it an action game, we ask? "Of course it's an action game!"



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Reviews

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.


94


96


117





92

98

110

84

Resident Evil 6

Four campaigns. Seven playable characters. 600 staff. But now there's only one number that matters...

AGREE/DISAGREE?

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IT'S REALLY DISAPPOINTING, ESPECIALLY AGAINST LIVING THINGS

Resident Evil 6

What's the difference between a game launched in the middle of a recession and one made during financially rosier times? *Resident Evil 6*. Featuring four distinct campaigns that span around 24 hours in total, seven playable characters, and a wealth of online modes and functionality, this is the biggest *Resident Evil* game, if nothing else. And that's exactly the problem, because in those previous years, Capcom apparently had the time and the money to throw content away.

It happened with *Resident Evil 2*, with series creator Shinji Mikami turning up close to the end of development and instructing *RE2* director Hideki Kamiya to throw everything away and start again. And it famously happened with *Resident Evil 4*, a series of prototypes either evolving into other games like *Devil May Cry* and *P.N.03* or being abandoned completely. In both cases, that willingness to make difficult, dramatic, painful decisions with those games resulted in end products that weren't just the highlights of the *Resident Evil* series but lessons in great sequel design and staggering reinvention respectively. Oh, and one of them is easily a contender for greatest game ever made.

Resident Evil 6 desperately needed a Mikami moment. Not necessarily Mikami himself, who has certainly underperformed in recent years, but someone in the position to take an objective look at the game and lop off the dead tissue, no matter how painful it may be. Yes, *Resident Evil 6* may be four games in one, as the marketing would have you believe, but much of that content is bloated, badly made, dull or just totally unnecessary.

Take the structure, for example. *RE6*'s story is divided into three main chapters, one starring Leon S Kennedy and partner Helena Harper, another starring Chris Redfield and team-mate Piers Nivans, and a third starring new protagonist Jake Muller alongside *RE2*'s child star Sherry Birkin, now all grown up. On top of this, there's an unlockable single-player chapter in which you play as surviving *Resident Evil* antagonist Ada Wong. It sounds great, doesn't it? A return to old-school conventions and perhaps, as **games™** speculated months ago, an expansion of *Resi 2*'s Zapping system, in which actions made in one campaign would subtly affect the other.

Resident Evil 6 doesn't do any of that. Instead, the interaction between the three main campaigns is passive and limited to narrative alone. At certain points, two plots will cross over for a few minutes. At best, this means that four players will get to work together during online co-op, and that's it. It really is just a navel-gazing way for fan favourite characters to meet each other, but even within that context it disappoints. It's unbelievable that flagship characters Chris and Leon might not have met before, so when they eventually do, it should be a monumental highlight. It isn't.

What you get is a brief cut-scene in which the two flail and flap their limp wrists against each other like cowardly schoolboys, while their partners pull the sourest faces they can during a Mexican standoff. Then there's a bit of shouting before everyone makes friends and goes their separate ways. There's very little to it, not even the QTE fisticuffs that made Leon and Krauser's showdown so memorable in *Resident Evil 4*. Furthermore, these crossover chapters suffer because they're essentially the same thing twice. There may be minor variations each time but, by and large, you're playing the same set piece or objective a second time, with a dull familiarity and, even worse, a bunch of cut-scenes you've already watched once before.

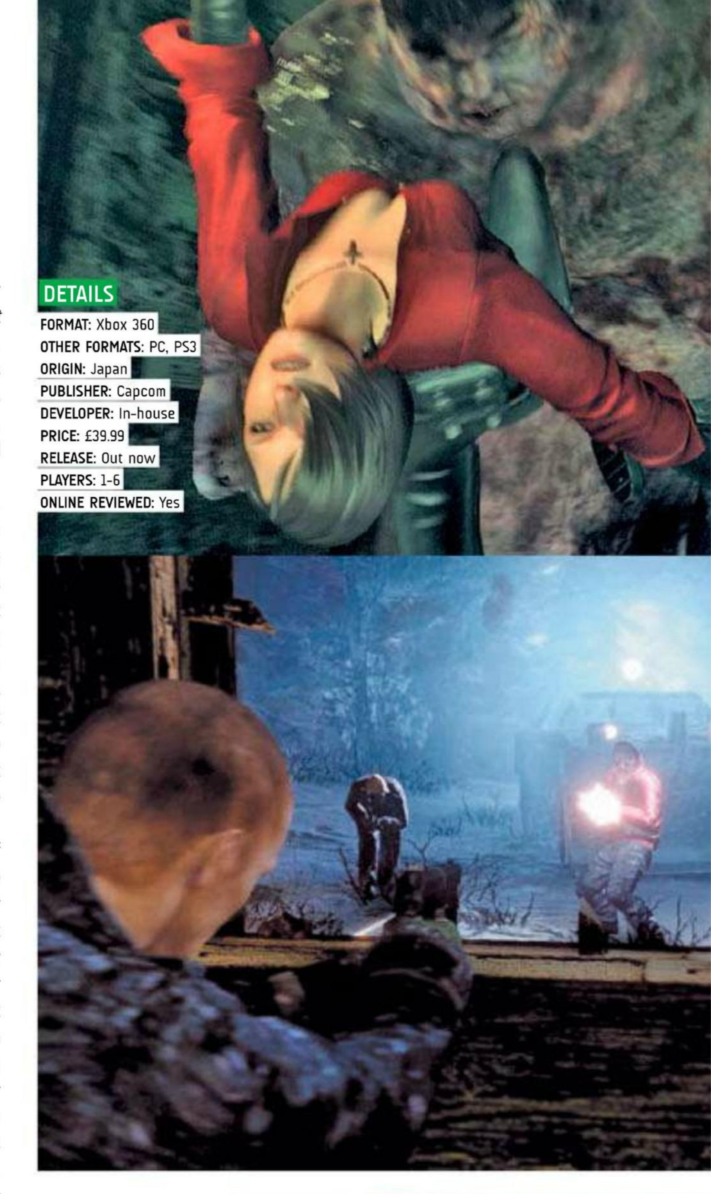
It's an idea that sounds good on paper but falls apart in practice, and we can't help but think that the game would have been better structured as one large, linear campaign that swaps between protagonists every now and then, like *Resident Evil Code: Veronica*. Such a structure would have also allowed

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

ONLINE EVIL: There's a wealth of online content in *RE6*, including Mercenaries, Agent Hunt, Versus, and an online hub to track stats. Forthcoming DLC includes Siege, Survivor and Predator modes.

MUCH OF THE CONTENT IS BLOATED, BADLY MADE, DULL OR JUST TOTALLY UNNECESSARY



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Above: Remember the under siege bit that worked so well in *RE4*? It's replicated a few times in *RE6*, generally to excellent effect.

BETTER THAN

RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS





WORSE THAN

SHADOWS OF THE DAMNED



Above: Co-op play is back, of course. But now it's drop-in/drop-out so you don't have to start and end a chapter at the same time as someone else.





MERCENARIES

The Mercenaries mode returns in *Resident Evil 6*, and now it can be played right from the start without needing to unlock it. Our first impressions: the maps are a little too big unless you're playing in co-op and it's infuriating that the recovery mechanic – in which players close to death crawl around on the floor until a team-mate saves them – is still used, even when you play alone. But, other than that, this is a decent iteration of Mercenaries that thankfully steers clear of many of the missteps made in 3DS spin-off *The Mercenaries 3D*. See you on the leaderboards!

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

15 MINS



You've made your way through the prologue set toward the end of the game. We're not sure why it's there either.

10 HOURS



By now you should have easily cleared the Leon campaign. Do you go for Chris or Jake next or lump it and get stuck into Mercenaries?

5 DAYS



Tenacious players should have unlocked Ada's campaign by now. Time to enjoy the best bit of the game.



Below: This chap is one of the better bosses in the game, a giant snake with an invisibility power. He really put the willies up us and is a nice call back to the first game.





Above: Being able to dodge attacks, throw yourself on the ground and shoot at zombies while you shuffle about or roll remains one of the strongest parts of *RE6*, though it does take some getting used to.

THIS BOXOUT WILL SELF-DESTRUCT...

It may sound like a mode where you get to play as the star of the *Mission: Impossible* movies, but Agent Hunt is something much more interesting. Seemingly inspired by the invasions of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, it allows up to two players to enter somebody else's campaign as a monster and hunt them down. It's not quite as integral as in From Software's games, but it is a fun and innovative feature. Inevitably, however, Agent Hunt has proved much more popular for those doing the hunting. *RE6*'s campaigns are frustrating enough without infinitely respawning griefers getting in your way. At least you can turn it off in the options.





Capcom to trim the fat. All three suffer because they're slow to start, in some cases taking half their own length to get to the good bits, while certain set pieces flop completely. A badly designed boss battle here, an underdeveloped vehicle section there. In isolation they're not so bad, but there are so many weak sections throughout that it becomes a little like Swiss cheese. You start to focus on the holes more than the good stuff.

Much has been made of the difference in play styles too, and although there are some subtle tonal differences, it's mechanically all very similar. Jake Muller is the most diverse of the characters. All have hand-to-hand abilities, used by hitting the trigger buttons without aiming a weapon, but Jake's are more powerful, chargeable, and can be used without running down his stamina gauge. It's hardly *Devil May Cry*, though. His moves are context-sensitive, and Jake players will need to rely on artillery at long range before getting in close for the kill, so even this is still very much the modern shooting game that *Resident Evil* has been working towards since part four.

Chris and Leon play identically, and it's only the tone, pace and enemy design that distinguish the two, making Chris's sections feel more militaristic while Leon's lean closer to horror adventure. A nightmare vision of what *Resident Evil 5* would have been like if it were anywhere near as bad as some people made out, Chris's campaign far too often sees him caught in a hail of infinite bullets that practically force you to play the game like a cover shooter. Only Capcom forgot to implement a good cover system. Getting into cover requires far too many buttons to be pressed at once, while peeking out to fire a few shots involves more, different inputs, like Capcom learned everything it knows about cover systems from *Time Crisis* rather than *Gears Of War*. Worse still, some enemies seem to have a magical ability to simply shoot through cover, making the frustrating experience entirely pointless.

Leon's campaign fares better. Though marred by the same mechanical issues, it asks less of them, setting a more horror-heavy tone that aims to get the pulse racing through atmosphere, art direction and pacing. The opening section in Tall Oaks University boasts moody lighting, detailed gothic environments and a horror flavour that flows between suspense, shock and panic with expert timing.

As the campaign progresses, we're treated to the Leon game we always knew could exist if only the technology could make it happen. Stuck in the middle of Tall Oaks as it's consumed by the C-Virus and descends into a chaotic zombie apocalypse conjures memories of Raccoon City but in glorious HD-o-vision, and the results are utterly captivating. The mood is perfect and a great sense of panic permeates, but without descending into a military corridor shooter. Instead, it feels like an extreme survival scenario: hold your ground, work with the few remaining survivors, and just try to outlast the carnage. This bit, as fleeting as it is, is the *Resident Evil* sequel we've always dreamed of.

From there, Capcom allows Leon's campaign to expand a little. A detour into unexpected *Dark Souls* territory, complete with body horror bosses, gloomy underground caverns and ancient, armour-wearing mummified zombies, may be one of the least obvious chapters in *Resident Evil* history, but it's also one of the best. Like all *RE6* protagonists, however, Leon eventually reaches China, where the game takes a more action movie approach, but by then his campaign has worked hard to get you on board and you're along for the ride.

Jake and Chris's stories, by contrast, are exactly the opposite. They each take several hours to pick up steam, and players will have to fight through a glut of tedium, frustration and boredom to get to the decent bits towards the end. Thankfully, these chapters are just about worth it. The final chapters of each feature some of the greatest bosses we've ever seen and find Capcom doing what it does best. That in both cases it manages to take a boss battle and essentially make it last for an entire hour-long chapter, shifting its location, design and attack patterns enough to stay exciting for the duration, is the sort of accomplishment that reminds you why we place so much faith in the studio to begin with.

It's not just the bosses either. Level design, plot and pacing all improve significantly towards the end, rewarding those willing to stick it out all the way through. Enemy design, especially, should be commended. Aside from the standard J'avo, a stock enemy capable of firing back, the enemies found in *Resident Evil 6* are consistently brilliant. Right down to the basic zombie, each will fight to the bitter end, and with AI routines that finally evolve those of *Resident Evil 4*. It feels like every new enemy type brings its own unique behaviour and requires a fresh strategy to beat it. Some will surprise you with the inventiveness of their design; others will just turn your stomach. Either way, they're a great reminder of what *Resident Evil* does best when it's on form.

Finally, there's Ada's campaign. More than the bonus levels tucked away at the end of the PS2 and Wii editions of *Resident Evil 4*, this story is a full game in much the same way as *RE6*'s other stories, except it's single-player only. And while this may seem like a weak point on paper, it's actually a smart idea. Making it a solo, offline experience allows the developer to slow down the pace a lot more than in the other campaigns, so Ada's stages are more complicated in design – the opening stage is a sinking submarine, whose layout changes as it twists over and gradually floods with water – and more puzzle-heavy. It's not quite as puzzling as the first *Resident Evil*, of course, but the chapters here are more taxing than either *Resident Evil 4* or *5*. And since this story crosses over with all three other protagonists, it allows Capcom to cherry-pick only the best locations of the game. Along with Leon's story, Ada's campaign is the highlight of *Resident Evil 6*. It's just a shame you have to slog through a lot of rubbish to get to it.

There's certainly no denying the argument that *Resident Evil 6* represents great value for money. The single-player content alone represents a hefty package before you even throw in the likes of Mercenaries (now open from the start) or the *Dark Souls*-inspired Agent Hunt mode, but this vast quantity and variety comes at the cost of consistent quality. There are moments in *RE6* that peak as high as the very best games in *Resident Evil* history, but there are so many more that settle for mediocrity or much, much worse. With a nip and tuck this could have been something very special indeed. Instead, it's a great little Leon campaign with a hell of a lot of content that you should consider a worthwhile but extremely flawed bonus.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ZOMBIE SURGERY: Lop out all the weaker content, merge the three stories into one 12-hour campaign with multiple characters, and keep the Ada missions as a bonus. Voila! A good *Resident Evil* game.

THERE ARE SO MANY WEAK SECTIONS THROUGHOUT RESIDENT EVIL 6 THAT IT STARTS TO BECOME A LITTLE LIKE SWISS CHEESE

VERDICT 7/10

MORE STEVE BURNSIDE THAN BARRY BURTON

FAQs

Q. IS THIS THE WORST RESIDENT EVIL?
Not quite. *Revelations* is worse. But this comes close, circling the drain alongside *Resident Evil 3*.

Q. BUT YOU GAVE IT A 7?
By *Resident Evil* standards, that's extremely disappointing, but it's still better than a lot of other videogames.

Q. SO IT'S STILL WORTH PLAYING?
Absolutely. If you're time-poor then play through the Leon campaign and find a save file to unlock Ada.



Below: Another new mechanic is an instant panic shot, done by hitting both triggers at once. In Ada's case, she does a backflip out of harm's way and reloads her crossbow at the same time.

THE ENEMY OF FREE TIME AND SOCIAL LIVES IS HERE

XCOM: Enemy Unknown*

Right: Alien autopsies are a vital part of your research. Corpses are taken home from successful missions and new technologies are derived from them. Live specimens are even more important, and your head scientist will put pressure on you to stun, rather than kill.

Hubris sets in after around 20 hours of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown.* We thought we saw the worst the aliens could throw at us, that the best of our veteran soldiers were invincible, and, worse, it occurred to us that this was Firaxis in 2012, not MicroProse in 1994. Reboot or not, we just couldn't imagine that the *Civ V* developer would make a turn-based strategy game as cruel or as punishing as a hardcore mid-Nineties PC classic. So like every proud empire, our fall was hard, delivered by successive waves of Mutons, armoured Floaters, Cyberdiscs, and their kin as the aliens turned their efforts to taking advantage of our poor research choices and inefficient use of government funding, overwhelming every squad we could throw at them and pushing mankind into oblivion… and we saw that it was good.

XCOM: Enemy Unknown is hard, then, as long as you want it to be. Stick the 'Ironman' option on (one save only, no option to leave the game without saving first), play on the classic difficulty setting and be warned: *XCOM* veterans will be faced with increasingly tough challenges. The only reason we didn't play the crushingly difficult top tier was because we remember Superhuman mode in the original and we don't want to end up crying again. We'll say this much now, though: we're hooked. It's a turn-based strategy game by Firaxis, which is almost a byword for addictiveness these days, but this is a potent time sink even by the studio's own high standards. So we suppose the burning question is whether or not it can really fill the shoes of *UFO: Enemy Unknown*.

Superficially, it could be a totally different game. There are still three parts to *XCOM* – the base, the geoscape and the tactical screen – but the single base you control has taken an 'ant farm' perspective, the geoscape bears some resemblance to the original, and missions could easily be an entirely new strategy game, thanks to Unreal Engine 3. Firaxis has also been playing with the *XCOM* formula, taking some ingredients out and adding others like a baker trying to make a classic fruit cake their own: multiple bases are gone, replaced with a single base and a satellite grid; time units have been swapped out for a simpler double-turn system; procedurally generated terrain has been replaced with a set number of maps; and large squads have been reduced to a six-man team. It sounds like a nightmare of dumbing down. But it's not.

In *XCOM*'s defence, squeezing your resources in this way has made it a more interesting game. There's no expanding into other territories with multiple bases if you live to regret your choice of layout, the limited squad size means you're more protective about your team, set maps mean tactically interesting terrain, and the locations are so numerous anyway that you can play through again without seeing the same one twice. And time units? You won't miss those.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Firaxis
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit dual-core CPU, 1GB RAM, 512MB VRAM (GeForce 8000/Radeon 2000 or better)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Above: Suppressing fire is a special ability that heavy-class soldiers can use to pin enemies down, giving them reduced aim and, in some cases, allowing other units aim bonuses against the pinned enemy.





Above: Overwatch punts a soldier into a reaction mode, using part of their turn to react against a moving enemy on the alien turn. It doesn't guarantee a hit, but it's very useful when you can't see where they're coming from.

A WORTHY AND FAR MORE APPROPRIATE REBOOT, EASILY THE MOST ADDICTIVE GAME THIS YEAR, AND ONE OF OUR FAVOURITE FIRAXIS GAMES EVER





FAQs

Q. WHAT ABOUT PROMOTIONS?
Soldiers are promoted, but along with a stat increase they also get special abilities.

Q. ARE THERE PSI-POWERS?
Yes. Your units can be mind-controlled, but again, psi-training will be available later on.

Q. ARE THERE ZOMBIES?
Yes. Chryssalids are back and they can turn your men into zombies. Their predictability makes them less scary, though.

HEAD-TO-HEAD

XCOM's head-to-head multiplayer sets two players against each other, controlling opposing teams of mixed aliens and humans. The idea is to wipe out the other team through battlefield tactics and strategic team-building. Before the match begins, each side is given 10,000 points to spend on their squad. A simple Sectoid costs 400 points, whereas an armoured Cyberdisc will set you back nearly half your allowance. Buying soldiers can be a little more complicated, as a rookie costs 800 points, but a fully ranked colonel with the best equipment can leave him without allies. It's a delicate balance and so, much like the single-player, luck of the terrain and the choices the other side makes will play a role in your victory or defeat.



We remember the old time unit system – you had to take a ledger with you each time you played to budget for every turn. We loved it, but we're utterly converted to the new one that, without accounting for any special abilities, allows every unit to take an action, move then take an action, or move twice. You can't kneel or go prone for a better shot, but cover is attributed a simple value (half or full cover) and you can 'hunker down' behind it for an even bigger defensive bonus. There's no ammunition, though you do need to reload, and no inventory, so most soldiers can only carry one main weapon and one backpack item like a medkit or frag grenade. Many aspects of *XCOM* have been stripped down, simplified, and as a result you spend only a little time deliberating over kit or budgeting for your next move, and more time in the field, deciding the tactics that you hope will keep your team alive.

On Classic mode that's a tough ask, because the game escalates fast. The aliens nearly always seem one step ahead; the respite you get when plasma rifles have been researched, your men get the protection they need from Titan armour, or your Interceptors are finally a match for alien vessels is brief enough to be rewarding before the ante is upped. Veterans will have an idea of what they're facing and the challenges to come, but you're still not prepared for your first encounter with a Cyberdisc or the alien ship that you discover is full of Mutons.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DROP SHIP: It should be an easy update for Firaxis – simply add a number of levels where the drop ship lands in the middle of the map, leaving us guessing where we'll find the aliens.

We have only one real gripe with *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, and as we are massive fans of the original, that's to be expected. We're cool with the fixed maps and even the way your squad starts outside the dropship, but the maps tend to be quite linear and the Skyranger always sets down at the edge of them, so you already have a good idea of the direction the aliens are in – there are never any surprises waiting in the dark for you when you land. The aliens only seem to be 'triggered' in batches whenever they come into sight, so once you've cleared a batch and as long as no one can see an alien, your men have all the time in the world to regroup and recover with no fear of an enemy advance. Both of these things take some of the unknown out of it; there was nothing quite like making that tentative walk off the Skyranger into the unknown, or the terror of exploring an alien base in the knowledge that Chryssalids and Mutons could burst through the room at the end of your turn.

Yet here we are, nearly 48 hours of playtime later, the end nowhere in sight, and enjoying *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* even more than we did at the beginning. It's a worthy and far more appropriate reboot of the franchise, easily the most addictive game this year, and one of our favourite Firaxis games ever.

VERDICT 9/10
FRESH, YET AUTHENTIC – A STUNNING REBOOT

ARENANET ATTEMPTS TO TAKE THE MMO IN MORE DYNAMIC DIRECTIONS

Guild Wars 2*

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: NCsoft
DEVELOPER: ArenaNet
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: MMO
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM, GeForce 7800/ATI X1800/Intel HD 3000 with 256MB VRAM and Shader Model 3.0, 25GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Below: *Guild Wars 2* has a system of daily and monthly achievements that dole out extra rewards as you play, really encouraging you to do a wider variety of things as you quest. It's a good incentive to try a bit of everything.

The fantasy-based MMO has always been plagued by a subtle irony. The genre is trying to live up to some grandiose ideals, to both immerse players in Tolkien-inspired high fantasy and deliver living gaming worlds for hundreds of participants, but all too often their rigid mechanics, based around prolonging the experience to justify a subscription, rob them of that magic, especially for anyone outside the MMO community. But in *Guild Wars 2*, ArenaNet has tried to evolve its non-subscription MMO to better appeal to everyone. While *Guild Wars 2* isn't perfect, a fusing of generous content and greater accessibility has resulted in one of the most welcoming and absorbing games in years, especially for newcomers to the genre.

Unlike most MMOs, which stack 'premium' content like massive monster fights in their endgame, *Guild Wars 2* sprinkles it liberally throughout the world of Tyria. For starters, each of the five races – the struggling Humans, Viking-like Norn, diminutive but technically brilliant Asura, warlike feline Charr and graceful sentient plant race the Sylvari – have starting quests sporting impressive large-scale confrontations of the sort you'd only expect at high levels in most MMOs. It isn't the only difference, as *GW2*'s quest system eschews logs or quest givers; missions are represented by hearts on the vast map and triggered simply by approaching them, with a progress bar keeping you appraised as to completion. It works because of the huge variety of quests on offer, from fighting bandits to exploring undersea villages or gathering special items. One of our quirky favourites saw us transformed into a pig and searching for truffles.

The grind isn't entirely gone, but it's been effectively hidden. Rather than slowly dribbling out content, *GW2* encourages exploration by a waypoint system allowing fast travel to any areas you're uncovered for quests, and XP is given for everything, including exploration. Even better, you're never lone-wolf questing, with players all around doing the same tasks and helping in combat. *GW2*'s open design means XP is shared, and while they're fairly traditional, a generous mix of objectives and organic co-operation makes them far more engaging. It's huge fun simply exploring, and while areas have ranked quests, a clever scaling system means you're always appropriately levelled but get worthwhile XP, so high-level players are de-levelled to quest with novice friends. You're equally driven by your character's individual quest, based on their class, race and questions asked during their creation, which play out in



FEW THINGS ARE AS JOYOUS AS BEING PART OF A HUGE CAVE TROLL ATTACK AS CROWDS OF ENTHUSIASTIC PLAYERS FLOOD INTO BATTLE

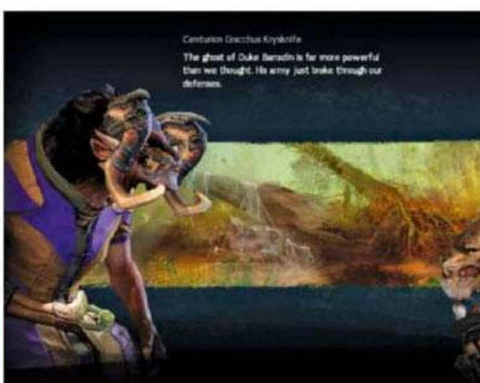


Above: Dynamic battles can be chaotic as swarms of players all charge in to help kill a powerful foe, but the rewards, in both XP and a warm feeling of community, are hard to top.



Above: While most MMOs treat the oceans as things that frame their worlds or put limits on where players can go, in Tyria their depths are another place to explore, with unique battles all of their own.





Above: Each character in *Guild Wars 2* has their own individual story threads played in separate instances, with a unique tale to tell.

NO MORE PLAYER HATING?

It might sound strange to those unfamiliar with MMOs, but many have a 'first come first served' mentality that leads to resentment over 'stealing' of objectives, resources and XP for mobs in PvE, as the player who misses out has to wait for things to respawn. That doesn't happen in *Guild Wars 2* because all players who kill an enemy get an equal share of the XP, and objectives and nodes are instanced to players rather than the world. It all makes players far more co-operative and helpful, as they have nothing to lose by being social animals at all levels. That, and the fact that players can all heal each other, contributes to a greater love of your fellow man in *GW2*.

your own little instances. These admittedly vary in narrative quality but provide solid goals right up to the highest levels.

But nothing defines this world quite like dynamic events that randomly spring up on the map. Anyone can simply join in, and few things are as joyous as being part of a huge cave troll attack, helping to escort a vulnerable convoy, or battling centaur legions as crowds of enthusiastic players flood into battle. They can often be chaotic, cacophonous affairs, with spell-casters like Elementalists and Mesmers filling the air with pyrotechnics as Warriors dive into melee, while Engineers, Rangers and Thieves attack with bows or guns. These dynamic events do repeat, but it's forgivable given the life they bring to the world.

That dynamism is echoed in *GW2*'s class system and combat. Members of any race can be any class, and they're extremely flexible. All classes can self-heal, and combat skills are tied to weapons, with the ability to switch between two sets. All too often, combat in an MMO entails simply spamming rote hotkey combinations while a virtual d20 determines outcomes. *GW2* is more action-based; while those unseen numbers are still churning, you can manually evade attacks and even block, albeit with an energy meter limiting your acrobatics. Knowing which abilities to use when is equally crucial in battle. All that combined with a very flexible skills/traits system means it's easy to tailor your character to your play style. To be fair, it's only once you reach *GW2*'s dungeons, like the Ascalonian Catacombs unlocked at level 30, that most players will find themselves really challenged in combat, but by that time most will have joined a guild or have regular friends to play with, which as with any MMO takes the experience to a whole new level as you co-operate and raid in a more focused manner and gain the benefits of membership. But if you want to play solo, *GW2*'s social framework means you're never without aid from nearby players.

FAQs

Q. CAN I TRADE OUTSIDE THE GAME?
Guild Wars 2 has both a real money store in the Black Lion Trading Company, and a *Diablo III*-style player auction house.

Q. ARE THERE ANY MOUNTS?
Nope. You don't have to level up for the privilege of mobility.

Q. WHAT ABOUT SERVER QUEUES?
Rather than stare at a queuing screen, *GW2* uses overflow maps that you can play in. They aren't perfect but they work..

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

BETTER THAN



AS GOOD AS

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PUBLIC DISORDER: The dynamic events in *Guild Wars 2* very much contribute to the feeling that this is a living world, and the XP given for them makes them as rewarding as they are fun.

Of course the next natural step for many will be PvP, and ArenaNet has provided 'the Mists', a separate area that features both smaller team-based objectives and large-scale PvE battles. With all players bumped up to level 80 in PvP, it's both a great preview of what's in store and effective training in your skills. PvP is accessible from the start and can initially be overwhelming; PvE dynamic events are chaos, but it's a Sunday school picnic compared to PvP. Mastery of your class, teamwork and serious keyboard co-ordination are required, and it's here that many veterans are likely to end up spending their time. That said, the objective-based nature of PvP maps, as well as additions like cannons, catapults and other fortifications, mean that any players can make themselves useful.

While *GW2*'s design is extremely accessible, it isn't as good as it should be at introducing players to concepts like its very useful crafting system or weapons upgrades through gameplay; it simply pops up explanatory HUD notes. Given how most players will miss those instructions, they can often be left asking for aid. The story quests can also be stop/start, as you often aren't high enough rank to go from one to the other, and with level scaling you can't rely on grinding in lower areas to boost stats.

Niggles aside, ArenaNet's ongoing rejection of the subscription model and the concept of an endgame has allowed it to create a landmark game that, like *World Of Warcraft*, is going to redefine what people expect from MMOs going forward. It's slick, enormous fun, continually dynamic, and more than any other MMO, it brings the genre closer to the ideal of a fantasy world filled with thousands of players in which just about anyone can lose themselves. That sentiment, as much as anything else, makes it well worth playing.

VERDICT 9/10
AN EVOLUTION, BUT GENRE-CHANGING NONETHELESS

THE BEHIND-THE-SCENES WIZARDRY TURNS DOA FROM A BUTTON-MASHY JIGGLATHON INTO... WELL, A SLIGHTLY LESS BUTTON-MASHY JIGGLATHON

POWER TRIP

While it initially seems a little gimmicky, it quickly becomes clear that the Power Blow system that *Dead Or Alive 5* introduces is actually a robust comeback device. Like *Street Fighter IV*'s Ultra Combos, these potent cinematic attacks come into play when your life is low. They can be flung out randomly or worked into advanced combos, here requiring use of the also-new Critical Burst mechanic. Nail an opponent with a suitably lengthy string of ground attacks and you'll eventually notice the on-screen text turn red. Land your Critical Burst move at this point and it crumples the opponent, disabling all forms of defence and giving just enough of a window to land your Power Blow. You can even do Tag Power Blows if both your characters in a tag match are low on life – a flashy and effective way to even the odds.



Right: Story mode's cut-scenes are frequently ridiculous, but at least they're not peppered with dodgy innuendo and questionable camera angles. Oh, wait...

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: Team Ninja
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

TEAM NINJA'S 'MATURE' REBOOT GOES TITS UP

Dead Or Alive 5

AS GOOD AS: MORTAL KOMBAT

WORSE THAN: DEAD OR ALIVE: DIMENSIONS

In a parallel universe somewhere, a fighting tournament is taking place. This setting is a lot like our own world in many ways, yet different in a good many others. It's a place where human females have water balloons strapped to their chests. A place where global warming has risen to the point where even a few moments of physical exertion are enough to cause sweat by the bucketload. A place where a 100-metre fall isn't instant death, but rather a mild annoyance that might leave a bit of a bruise. It's a place in which stereotyping has grown so rife that its many and diverse cultures have decided to simply behave and speak as the ignorant society expects. And it's a place where the slightest grievance leads to two people throwing each other through walls, off buildings and into explosions. Put simply, it's a very silly place indeed, though that does at least make it the perfect setting for a fighting spectacle like no other.



Left: Power Blows can set off unique gimmicks on each stage, though the game could probably use a few more of them to make it worthwhile.

But while much is made of the spectacle, it'd be remiss to ignore the behind-the-scenes wizardry that Team Ninja has performed to turn *DOA* from a button-mashy jigglathon into… well, a slightly less button-mashy jigglathon. The combo system returns largely untouched, though the potential for ground-based strings sets *DOA* apart from the majority of today's juggle-heavy fighters. Although you can't block during an opponent's combo, you're free to try your luck with the franchise's trademark catch-all 'hold' system. Correctly read an opponent's attacks and you can break the combo with a counter, but fail and damage scaling resets, meaning you end up taking even more punishment. It's a genuinely brilliant mechanic that forces both sides to consider their options before acting – attackers must mix up their strings to avoid being easily countered, while defenders must commit to counter choices entirely, though predictable play can be more easily punished.

This is thanks in no small part to the new Expert Holds, advanced counters that offer greater damage to those with the skill and foresight to land them. The new system levels the playing field somewhat – the basic counters deal mostly uniform damage, while these enhanced versions give every character the reversal harm potential that characters like Hayabusa once monopolised. The game's triangle system seems to work far better than in the past as well – strikes beat throws, throws beat holds and holds beat strikes – and while a few features like Offensive Holds, which are grabs that can also beat some striking attacks, mess with the system a little, it still holds up brilliantly and presents mind games and mix-ups aplenty.

Despite refinements on a technical level, though, the franchise's daftness seems to have infected a few other aspects of the game. Story mode, for one, is a big ol' bucket of nonsense. Although it attempts to show the same stupid events from the perspectives of all the major characters, all this really means is that you end up seeing the same cut-scenes a bunch of times, and most of them aren't as impressive as the stuff that happens in the ring. It's certainly worth highlighting the impossibly short fuses of the cast according to the story, though, if only because it's hilarious. "You're wearing yellow – let's fight." "I skipped breakfast – let's fight." "Your name has a vowel in it – let's fight." Honestly, they barely need an excuse.

But beyond the brief, batty and repetitive Story mode, there's very little on offer for those who don't want to fight another human. Staples like Arcade, Time Attack and Survival modes are all present and correct, but they lack the nuance and depth that the genre – and indeed the series – has seen in its finest hour. The latter mode is perhaps the worst offender in this respect. Tag Survival is nowhere to be seen, and those who enjoyed beating items and rare pick-ups out of people forever in earlier iterations will be saddened to learn that *DOA5*'s version is a finite, bare-bones gauntlet.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

KER-BLAM: Danger Zones have always played a part in *DOA* matches, but 5's Cliffhanger moments and stage-specific events really push the cinematic angle. We just wish there were more of them.

FAQs

Q. WAIT, VF CHARACTERS?
Yep, three of them. Akira, Sarah and Pai all feature, playing almost identically to their *Final Showdown* counterparts save for a few combo differences.

Q. WHAT ABOUT THE OTHERS?
Most *DOA* veterans return, with newcomers Rig and Mila both offering something a little different to the rest of the cast.

Q. IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT BOOBS NOW, RIGHT?
Yeah, about that. Team Ninja's early promises might not have been entirely accurate. There's no 'age' option this time, at least – probably just as well, given all the dangerously jiggly lady bits on show already.

It's a largely familiar cast, with a few new faces on hand to change things up a little. The *Virtua Fighter* trio of Akira, Sarah and Pai – all taking breaks from the most technical fighter on the market to moonlight in one of the least – play and feel almost exactly as they do in *Final Showdown*, right down to the whooshing sound effects that accompany their circular attacks. They're hardly great fits, but if their second jobs here can raise the profile of their home property, it's got to be worthwhile. As far as the newbies are concerned, it's a strong if meagre showing – Rig's heavy-hitting and flashy striking game flows nicely, while Mila's MMA mix-ups and feints make her a menace in the hands of a skilled player.

But is it the more mature fighter that Tecmo Koei promised? On a mechanical level, yes. It'd take the most hardcore of fighting fans to put together an argument that this wasn't a decent fighter at its core, and they'd struggle even harder to claim that it wasn't at least entertaining. On a base level, though, it's business as usual. It's a fighting game loaded with increasingly damp and dirty scantily clad ladies whose breasts defy physics, and one that has an Achievement for watching every questionably shot, moist, groaning defeat pose. The game might have grown up, but the developer clearly hasn't.

Above: Akira and friends make bizarre cameo appearances here. If you want to use them, though, just download the far superior *Final Showdown* instead.

Left: Tag mode remains the game's highlight, packed with awesome team combos and unique throws.



VERDICT 7/10

AN ENTERTAINING FUSION OF DECENT AND INDECENT

CAN RUNIC GAMES' DAVID TOPPLE BLIZZARD'S LOOT-CONQUERING GOLIATH?

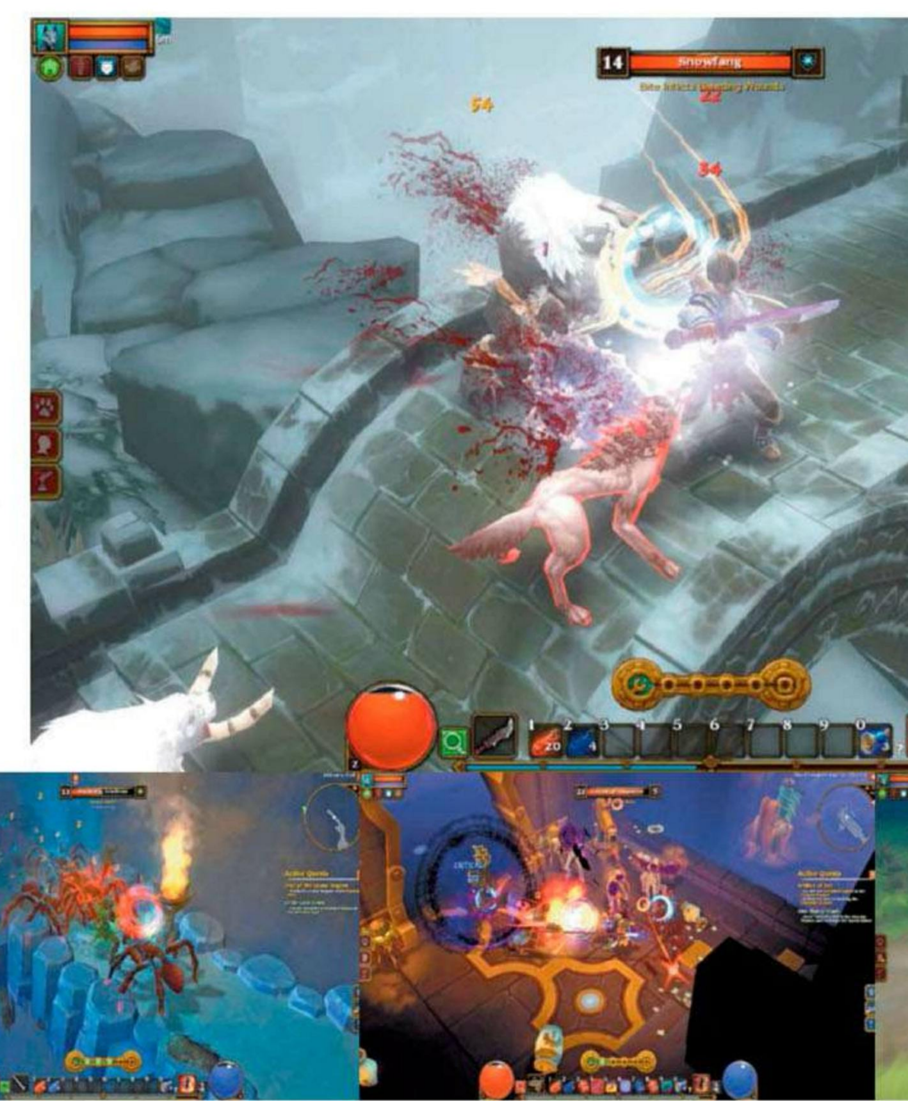
Torchlight II

Loot. It's long become a staple of the action RPG, but recently it appears to be everywhere in videogames. *Borderlands 2* has turned the acquisition of things that go bang and boom into an art form, *Darksiders II* had an unhealthy obsession with collecting ever more outlandish weaponry, and *Krater* was just... Well, it was rubbish.

It's arguably Blizzard's *Diablo III* that has set the current standard for loot-drop games, however, delivering a polished experience that has turned grinding and endless loot cycling into a higher purpose for millions of gamers. So surely, with Blizzard's game still turning heads, there's little room in the action RPG genre for another upstart? Runic Games would beg to differ, and after more hours than we can care to remember, we do too.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Runic Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, x86-compatible 1.4GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 1.2GB HDD space, 256MB VRAM, DirectX 9.0c
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Torchlight II not only successfully builds on its enjoyable 2009 predecessor but takes the franchise in all manner of exciting new directions. While *Torchlight* was a bunch of former *Diablo* developers cautiously testing out new ideas, its sequel is bold, brash and fully confident in its ability to take an established genre in interesting new directions.

The most obvious of these is *Torchlight II*'s ability to finally let you adventure with a party of other players, either online or via LAN. While it initially suffered from numerous matchmaking issues, games for the most part are stable and a hell of a lot of fun. It can certainly get hectic when six players are all scrapping away at the same time, but it never descends into outright chaos. Runic should also be commended for ensuring that players receive their own loot while playing together, meaning adventurers can team up with total strangers without the fear of having their goodies stolen. While there's nothing to compete with Blizzard's online auction house, the entire system is extremely robust, and in the weeks since *Torchlight II*'s launch, we've never had a problem playing online.

The real beauty of *Torchlight II* is that as good as cracking skulls with friends is, the



TORCHLIGHT II IS BOLD, BRASH AND CONFIDENT IN ITS ABILITY TO TAKE AN ESTABLISHED GENRE IN INTERESTING NEW DIRECTIONS





Left: One of the new additions to *Torchlight* is the charge bar mechanic. Simply beat an enemy to raise your bar. Once it's high enough, you can unleash an extremely powerful attack.

TORCHLIGHT

BETTER THAN





AS GOOD AS

DIABLO III

Left: A starting character offers you all sorts of choices. Embermages allow you to specialise in three distinct elemental skills: fire, lightning and ice. Invest enough points and you'll be able to unleash devastating waves of magic on your enemies.



WORLD-CHANGER

If *Torchlight* had one fault, it's that the samey dungeons soon became extremely boring to explore. *Torchlight II* effortlessly clears this hurdle by delivering a far more believable world for your adventurers. The locations are admittedly based on tried-and-tested RPG clichés, but the design work throughout each is stunning, while the ever-changing dungeons ensure that *Torchlight II* offers huge longevity. Icy wastelands give way to verdant, rolling fields; settlements bustle with cosy-looking log cabins and well-tended fires; and deserts hide complex mechanical hideouts that house all manner of clockwork monstrosities. The enemies that inhabit Torchlight's world are also familiar but are so diverse that the endless combat never becomes throwaway.

game is just as satisfying when playing on your own. This is largely down to Runic's experience within the field, as well as your ever-present pet, who has been significantly enhanced since the original game, fighting more intelligently than before. It's also possible to give them a shopping list of useful items, saving you a trip.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

RAIDING PARTY: It sounds obvious, but the multiplayer in *Torchlight II* really makes a difference. The lobby-based system isn't as slick as Blizzard's, but it adds immeasurably to the *Torchlight* experience.

One interesting aspect of Runic's sequel is that none of the character classes from the original game return. Instead you now have four new classes to get to grips with: Engineer, Outlander, Embermage and Berserker. The Engineer is a multipurpose fighter, able to mix heavy weaponry with the ability to create a number of useful constructs, while the Outlander relies on speed and ranged attacks and dabbles with magic. The Berserker takes on the role of tank and has access to all manner of heavy duty weaponry and the ability to summon animal spirits, with the Embernage excelling at flinging spells and specialising in elemental magic.

All four characters have three distinct skill trees, meaning that *Torchlight II* offers a satisfying amount of customisation, as well as an extremely generous level cap that takes you all the way to level 100. While the included skills and attributes don't feel as well-balanced as those in *Diablo III*, they nevertheless allow you to take your characters in all sorts of exciting directions, as you work out what's best for your current style of play. It's worth noting, though, that you're pretty much locked on the paths you choose, and although it is possible to reselect the last three chosen skills for a price, the skill trees lack the flexibility of *Diablo III*.

For the most part, many will not care, as the sheer breadth and variety on offer in *Torchlight II* is genuinely pleasing. The ever-deepening mine of the original game has been replaced with a mix of exotic, randomly designed locations. New weather and night and day effects add to the diversity, while *Torchlight*'s distinctive-looking world scales beautifully, regardless of your system. It's not going to tax your hardware by any means, but the distinctive art style and beautifully designed enemies will have you constantly zooming in with your mouse wheel so you can better savour the exciting world that was first hinted at in *Torchlight*.

FAQs

Q. SO FOUR ACTS, THEN?
Indeed, although it's worth noting that the final act is nowhere near as expansive as the three before it.

Q. CAN I STILL FISH?
You certainly can. There are plenty of different fish to discover, which will enhance your pet's abilities once they're fed to it.

Q. BUT IS IT BETTER THAN DIABLO?
It lacks the polish, certainly, but the high level cap, cheap entry point and strong customisation make it a worthy alternative.

Yes, it can be argued that *Torchlight II* adds little to the genre, and yes, it feels slightly rough around the edges compared to Blizzard's super-slick behemoth, but it remains an impressive achievement in itself, and is a massive improvement over the original game. Quests are better structured and there are plenty of nice little touches like being able to turn off low-level loot – handy on later playthroughs when you want to avoid accumulating worthless junk – while the combat remains meaty and endlessly satisfying. It's also a keeper, offering plenty of replay value via new game restarts, and that's without fully exploring each distinct class.

It's something of a shame, then, that *Torchlight*'s story rarely digs into you in the same way that its combat and customisation do. While it ties in with events from the original game, it's a largely bland affair, filled with predictable moments and stereotypical characters. It's a single weak link in an otherwise strong chain, though, and proves that you don't need to be a multimillion-dollar colossus in order to make a memorable impact on a well-trodden genre.

VERDICT 8/10
IT'S BUDGET IN PRICE, BUT EPIC IN SCALE

THEY'RE WAITING FOR YOU AGAIN… IN THE TEST CHAMBER

Black Mesa*

It's not often that Valve gets put to shame. The darling of PC gaming can do little wrong, even when it does do things that irritate its fans – say hello, *Left 4 Dead 2*. So it makes *Black Mesa* all the more surprising for a number of reasons: it's a mod, it's brilliant, and it shows up Valve completely for merely shunting out *Half-Life: Source* as a forgotten non-remake that failed to harness the then-new Source engine's prowess. A group of 40 or so dedicated modders – some professional programmers and artists, some not – have all spent their free time over the last eight years crafting *Black Mesa*.

It was voted vapourware of the year, two years running. It became a running joke – the modding community's equivalent of *Duke Nukem Forever*, apparently consigned to development hell for the rest of days. People who were once so enthusiastic about the project – entirely remaking the original *Half-Life* using the Source engine in a way Valve itself never bothered doing – forgot about it, moved on, got on with their lives.

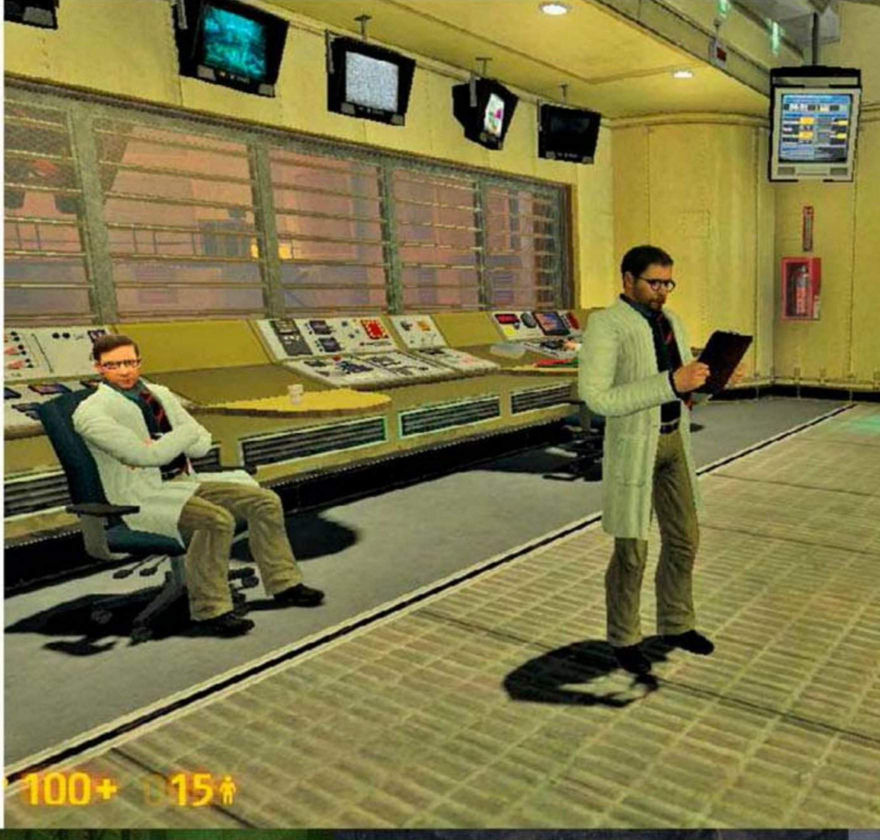
Not long ago, *Black Mesa* was released. It isn't vapourware, it certainly isn't like *Duke Nukem Forever*, and it absolutely should not be forgotten about. This is quite possibly the best mod we have ever played.

Everything you would expect from such a project has been updated, tweaked, changed or simply slapped with better textures. It's not amazing to look at by modern standards, but compared to 2007-era Source engine games it does the job admirably. And, of course, when compared to the original it's based on, it blows *Half-Life* out of the water.

More than just higher-definition textures and better character models, though, the game incorporates everything you would expect from Source: realistic physics, naturalistic lighting and updated AI that means Headcrab zombies will smack barrels your way and Barney and his army of security guards will *get out of the way* when needs be.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: N/A
DEVELOPER: Black Mesa Modification Team
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, Pentium 4 3.0 GHz, 1GB RAM, ATI 9600/Nvidia 6600 or better, 8GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Right: You'll see familiar faces in some of the models, but generally it's a new crop of repeating faces popping up.



FAQs

Q. WHY ARE VORTIGAUNTS ATTACKING?
Because, you poor, canonically challenged fool, these unlucky aliens were enslaved by the Nihilanth at this point in the story.

Q. ANY BAD GUYS MISSING?
Every enemy from the original appears – even those annoying little green buggers.

Q. WHY DIDN'T YOU REVIEW HALF-LIFE 2?
We're just biding our time and waiting for *Black Mesa 2* before giving it a once-over. It's only fair.



ANYTHING THAT DIDN'T WORK FIRST TIME AROUND HAS BEEN SWAPPED OUT WITH SURGICAL CARE AND PRECISION





Left: Platforming in first-person games has thankfully been rare in modern times, but *Black Mesa* reminds us of a time that we didn't want to be reminded of.



And the updates don't stop there. *Black Mesa* is the product of a group of fans who know *Half-Life*, love *Half-Life* and respect *Half-Life*, but it's also the product of people who understand things like how to create coherent worlds for the player to pass through. A few kinks from the original game have been ironed out – a room added here, a ladder placed there – and none of it feels pointless or misjudged. It's clear that there has been a lot of care taken to restore everything as accurately as possible, and anything that just didn't work or didn't feel right first time around has been swapped out with surgical care and precision.

The same goes for voicework and the addition of – get this – humour. While some of the soldiers sound like people merely trying to sound tough or B-movie evil, the majority of the vocals are excellent, with volunteer soundalikes for the original actors performing admirably. Layered on top of this fine work is a layer of very knowing, self-aware comedy – an entire deconstruction of the motivations of the team behind *Black Mesa*; individuals within the game complaining that their job comprises little more than walking a set route and staring at a screen for hours before returning to their set, programmed routine. It all fits. It's not all hilarious, but there's sure to be smiles raised as a result, and it's all handled with enough subtlety that none of the excitement, trepidation or outright fear of the game itself is lost.

This would all be for nought if there weren't a solid game backing it all up, so it helps that *Black Mesa* is based on such an esteemed framework. Originally released in 1998, *Half-Life* was Valve's big hello to the world and instantly rendered the majority of first-person shooters redundant. A long time has passed since its debut, but there's still a hell of a lot about the game that impresses and shows just how forward-thinking the original release was in terms of design.

Yes, there are issues that have survived the nip and tuck and been happily carried over into *Black Mesa*, like horrible, floaty platforming sections that will see deaths through no fault of the player. There is little in the way of tactics when fighting enemies – who, once you've been spotted, always know where you are, not seeming nearly as impressively clever as they did in 1998 – beyond strafing and emptying every clip of every weapon into them. Some unchanged level design is confusing, with a total lack of signposting leading to half-hour searches for a way out of a room, only to notice a small, barely visible ladder in a dark corner. None of these niggles or the others carried over are deal-breakers, and in fact many just feel like quirks of a game that's comfortably more than a decade old.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

NOT YET: While plans are still afoot to bring deathmatch to *Black Mesa*, for the time being the team is still slowly beavering away at the single-player experience. Maybe in 2020 at this rate.

And the reason why it's so easy to ignore the faults – so easy to shrug off falling off a ladder *again* – is because there's joy in taking on an entire platoon of troops as a goatee-sporting nerd. There's joy in taking on situations and knowing they aren't scripted half to death. There's joy in scamming your way through a puzzle by pretty much breaking the game. There's joy in thwacking a midair Headcrab with your crowbar. The reason it's so easy to ignore *Half-Life*'s – and thus *Black Mesa*'s – faults is that there's so much fun to be found within it.

So what has come out of all this? We've seen that we shouldn't doubt the sincerity of a team of people working together just because something is taking them a long time. We've seen that Valve is not perfect. We've seen it is possible to take something brilliant and make it better if the right amount of care is given. And we've seen that *Half-Life*, a 14-year-old FPS, is still better than a hell of a lot of its current-generation pretenders.



VERDICT 9/10

HAVE YOU HEARD THE NEWS? GORDON'S ALIVE.

Left: It's never gratuitous with the gore, nor does it ever reach Ravenholm levels of scares, but there's a definite helping of both elements in *Black Mesa*. You will jump at the sudden appearance of a Headcrab, and there will indeed be blood.



XEN PINBALL

There is a noticeable absence of an ending in *Black Mesa* – the version released runs until the Lambda Core chapter and does not include the levels where Dr Freeman makes his merry way to the alien world of Xen. While we would accept this as a purposeful choice – nobody liked those levels anyway, with their irritating platforming and stupid giant baby final boss – the team is still hard at work on bringing the levels to us. Hopefully they will have made just as many tweaks and fixes as are present in the initial release, which would actually mean just not releasing the Xen levels at all. Really, they were quite bad. We can live without them.

NATURAL SELECTION JUST CAME HOME

Tokyo Jungle

***Tokyo Jungle* is one of those games that seems purpose-built to make Western audiences shake their head knowingly and say, with a smile, "Japan, eh? Ker-azy."** Coming across like a demented mixture of *Metal Gear Solid*, *SOS: The Final Escape* and an animal version of *The Warriors*, it's not surprising that the game enjoyed such good buzz: it's about as far away from the norm as you can get. You play as a Pomeranian, and that's just how it starts. Wait until you see the polar bears.

What is surprising is that there's a genuinely good game under all the hype. *Tokyo Jungle*'s buzz might be built on people's shaky grasp of its concept, but its mechanics are solid. With all human life eradicated, the only inhabitants left are the members of the animal kingdom. Starting with the aforementioned species of dog, your mission is to survive long enough against predators, hunger and occasional environmental toxicity to propagate your species. Make it through sufficient generations and you might just find out what happened to the humans in the first place, via archives left dotted around. Yeah, the animals can read. They can also wear stat-boosting clothes.

It's a simple conceit, but an addictive one underpinned by core mechanics that don't really change; they merely become more difficult to achieve as the years roll by and the next generation of animal takes to the streets. Tokyo is split up into various districts, each differing in type – commercial, suburban, and so on – and, more importantly, food levels. At its most basic, *Tokyo Jungle* is about securing flags to form a nest to enable you to safely exit the session, finding a mate, and producing offspring to survive the generations.

Easier said than done. The streets are in some cases literally crawling with predators, ranging from your own species to dinosaurs and everything in between. Food levels naturally decrease over time, and, worst of all, you have to prove your worth to find a mate that doesn't have fleas and hence produce stronger offspring. No problem if you're a polar bear, but trickier if you're a chick.

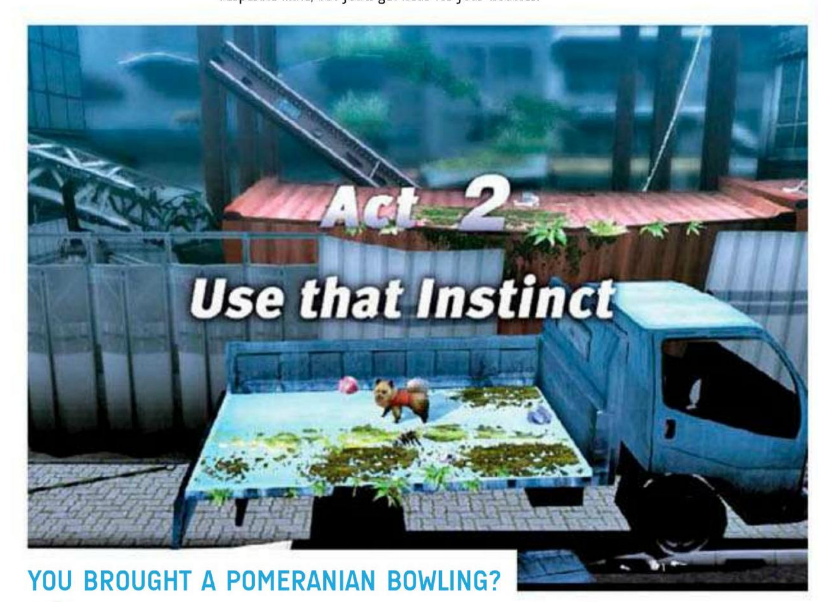
You're also constantly challenged by the game to achieve certain goals, with stringent success/failure conditions attached to them. Complete these gauntlets and excel in other areas, such as overall bloodline length, and your all-important survival ranking will

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Crispy's
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



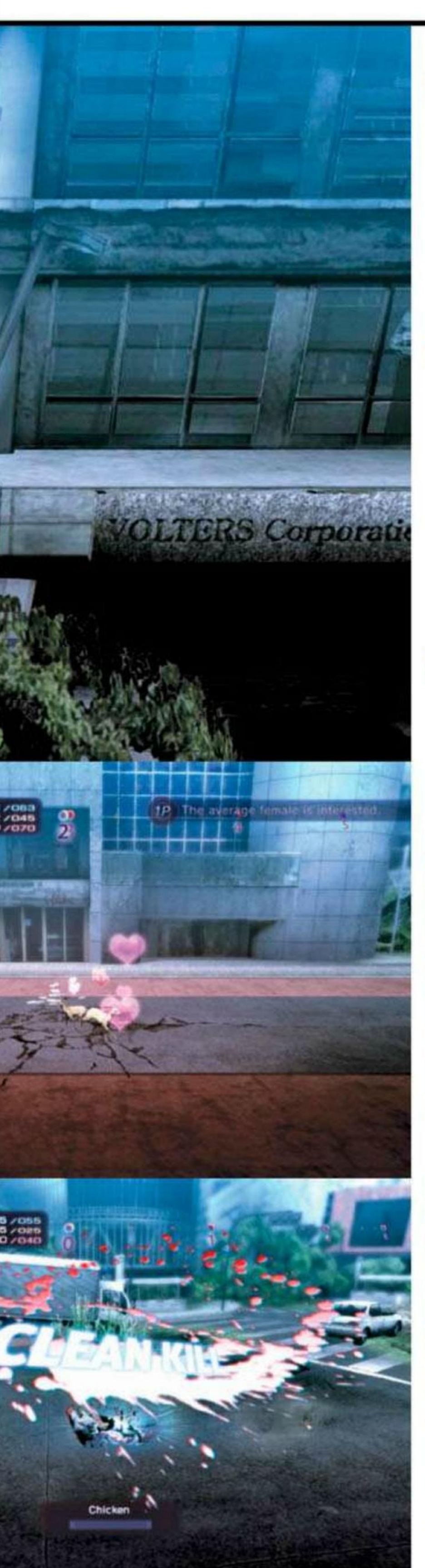
Above: Your health meter will steadily decrease if your hunger bar is depleted. Water can replenish some health, but it's only a temporary measure. Right: There are three types of female for you to impress: prime, average and desperate. It doesn't take a lot of levelling to acquire a desperate mate, but you'll get fleas for your troubles.





YOU BROUGHT A POMERANIAN BOWLING?

Okay, so you can't quite do that. You can, however, get up to equally bizarre shenanigans in *Tokyo Jungle*'s story. Complete certain tasks in Survival and you'll unlock bespoke chapters to play through next time you're at the main menu. Starting as Walter Sobchak's favourite breed of dog, finding its feet in a dehumanised world, and then taking control of other animals, these quests are smaller in nature than the constantly rolling Survival mode but also tie in to it. Unlocking all of the chapters will help lift the lid on just what happened to the human population, and best of all, they're introduced with dialogue that is so po-faced it's utterly hilarious. As if you needed more reason to buy this game.



BETTER THAN

DISASTER: DAY OF CRISIS





JUST LIKE

SOS: THE FINAL ESCAPE

continue to rise. Die, and it's all over bar a new entry on the high score table.

So while you might have created a nice little nest in Tokyo's downtown shopping district, soon you'll be asked to make the trip all the way across town to track down and unlock another animal, or eat a certain amount of food, depleting your stash in the process, or any of the other tasks thrown your way.

It's risk versus reward, and beguilingly addictive. As you struggle for survival and roam the streets, there's a great sense of adventure in discovering new areas and their inhabitants. It's hard not to get attached to your ever-increasing pack of animals, especially when you've been keeping the bloodline going over years and it could all end any minute.

Each species has its pros and cons, usually broken down over the speed/strength axis, and you'll have to choose your strategy wisely. Predators may have the luxury of being able to eat everything via a simple stalking and stealth kill system, or more conventional attacks when face to face, but they have to engage their food, meaning risk. Prey can only get sustenance from plants and water found in the world, but they can use superior speed to evade hunters while relying on the game's stealth mechanics to hide in the thick undergrowth that litters the city as nature reclaims it.

Either way, soon you will encounter trouble, and it's here that the best-laid plans of mice, men and every other animal fall apart. Levelling your current generation of animal makes all the difference in both fighting and fornicating, but there will come a time when you're hopelessly outgunned and on the run, and it's here that *Tokyo Jungle* is at its best. With a constantly depleting hunger meter, food running out and challenges to be completed, the sense of trepidation, excitement and anticipation about setting off for pastures new is enhanced.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ONE OF A KIND: We're sure you don't need us to tell you what makes *Tokyo Jungle* stand out, but for all of its curiosity value there's a solid game underneath it all.

FAQs

Q. IS THIS THAT WEIRD ANIMAL GAME?
Yeah.

Q. WHERE YOU PLAY AS A DOG?
Yup, and other animals too.

Q. CRAZY, RIGHT?
Barmy, but good with it as well.

IT'S HARD NOT TO GET ATTACHED TO YOUR EVER-INCREASING PACK OF ANIMALS, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COULD ALL END ANY MINUTE



Above: Gift boxes are well worth seeking out. Some contain archive material that helps unlock new chapters, whereas others offer clothing and medication, which help buff and cure your animal respectively. **Left:** Sneaking up behind your prey and hitting R1 at the right time will see your animal execute a clean kill, for which you will receive more survival points.

Not bad for a game that, at first glance, appeared to be a cute little download that couldn't be more Japanese if it tried. It's rough around the edges, no graphical wonder, and there's no denying that, after a while, the game can become samey, especially if played over long periods.

But it's also alluring, encouraging players to beat their own and their friends' scores. Almost everything you do is ranked, and while the rinse-and-repeat Survival mode might irritate some, it does play nicely into applying what you've learned each time. Frustrating it may be to lose the latest powered-up beast in a lineage that stretches back years, but you'll soon want to start it all again.

The rewards for playing well also stretch beyond bragging rights, with a steady string of unlocks up for grabs. With an entire ark full of animals on offer and a chapter-based story mode to dive into as well, there's a constantly evolving roster to play around with.

It might be bonkers in its concept, but in execution *Tokyo Jungle* is solid, addictive and, best of all, different.



VERDICT 7/10
WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

SACKBOY GIVES THE VITA A MUCH-NEEDED SHOT IN THE ARM

LittleBigPlanet PS Vita*

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK/Sweden
PUBLISHER: SCE Europe
DEVELOPER: Tarsier Studios, Double Eleven
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

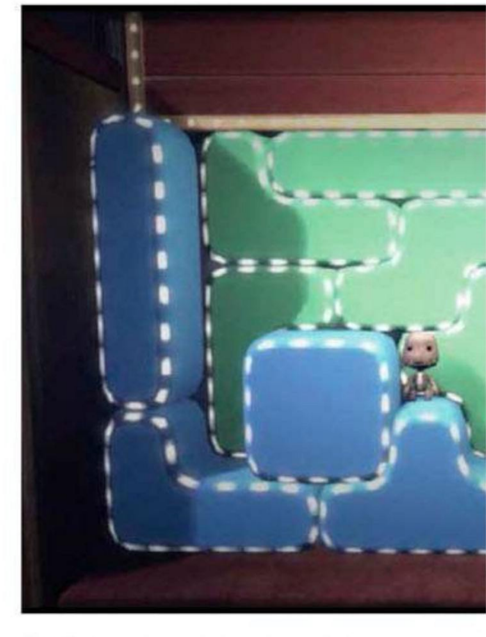


While many Vita fans will expend a tremendous amount of energy in extolling the virtues of *Gravity Rush*, *WipEout 2048* and *Uncharted: Golden Abyss*, there seems to be a general feeling that Sony's latest handheld is lacking its killer app – the release that transforms it from a mildly desirable purchase to an absolute must-have. With the arrival of *LittleBigPlanet*, that moment has come.

Just like the two previous PS3 games, this pocket-sized proposition can be roughly divided into two sections: Story and Creation. The former tasks you with liberating the oppressed people of the planet of Carnivalia from the subjugation of the evil Hollows, who take orders from a malevolent being referred to, rather ominously, as The Puppeteer. Set across a wide and varied set of levels, multiplayer challenges and other goodies, this mode provides enough entertainment to justify the purchase alone. Particularly worthy of praise is the inspired level design, which makes full use of *LittleBigPlanet PS Vita*'s expanded and enhanced control system.

While the interface will be familiar to veterans of the PS3 instalments, the Vita's unique dual touch panel arrangement is utilised to the utmost. Sections of the environment can be interacted with directly by tapping or swiping a digit on either the display or the rear touch panel. Prodding the screen will push things in, while a light tap on the back of the Vita will nudge objects towards the player. Other commands, such as firing a helmet-based missile launcher, are also assigned to the touch panel. It's a system that takes a little getting used to – having to constantly adjust your grip for touch interaction can often break your groove during intense gameplay – but you rapidly learn to live with it, and consequently discover a whole new layer of influence that simply wasn't possible on the home console editions.

However, as any self-respecting Sackboy lover will tell you, the real meat of *LittleBigPlanet*



Above: The blue and green blocks can be moved using the Vita's dual touch panels, using the system's inputs to provide a better experience than is possible on the PS3.

Below: Expect *LBP PS Vita*'s online community to rival that of the console versions, with similarly impressive results once hardcore fans get their hands on it.

FAQs

Q. CAN I TRANSFER CONTENT FROM THE PS3?
Sadly not – you can't share levels between this game and *LBP* or *LBP2*. Sorry!

Q. WHAT ABOUT SAVING LEVELS?
You can download user-created stages to your Vita for when you're out of Wi-Fi range.

Q. IS STEPHEN FRY STILL INVOLVED?
Why of course! It simply wouldn't be the same without him, right?

Below: The game's boss encounters require patience, forward planning and swift reflexes.



IT HARNESSES THE HARDWARE'S BEST FEATURES TO ACHIEVE AN INTOXICATING BREW OF WHIMSICAL PLATFORMING AND BLEEDING-EDGE USER CREATION

lies in creating content and sharing it with others. The community that has grown up around the PS3 titles has spawned a frightening number of user-generated levels, and that element of invention is alive and well on Vita. In fact, it's even more robust than before, offering an occasionally daunting degree of potential.

Using the game's fully featured creation system, you can craft levels, write dialogue, forge puzzles and dream up entire genres – all of which can be set to music and made to appear like a proper, professionally produced videogame. The Vita's touch controls prove invaluable, allowing you to scale and rotate objects and generally enjoy a vastly superior level of control. Another big plus is the ability to add save points within your games – a feature that essentially offers the chance to create a 40-hour RPG epic, if you so wish. As you can imagine, this online component is dependent on a constant internet connection, which could prove problematic if you don't own a 3G-equipped Vita and enjoy leaving the comfort of your home. Mercifully, the developers have considered this eventuality and have made it possible to download user-generated levels directly to your console's memory card, so you can continue to play even when you're out of range of a Wi-Fi hotspot.

Using objects discovered in the story mode – a mechanic that strikes the perfect balance by encouraging players to spend as much time in that part of the game as possible – you can craft practically anything. And when that's not enough, you can use the Vita's camera to generate unique textures, which in turn leads to some surprisingly off-the-wall results. One user-created level we had the pleasure of sampling was essentially a trek through the career of the American pop band Huey Lewis And The News, with the culmination of the level being a pop-up dialogue box stating that your participation was an admission that said band were the greatest musical act in the history of mankind. While the gameplay was lacking and the conclusion arguable, it served as a reminder that *LittleBigPlanet* is as much about creative expression through interactivity as it is traditional gaming.

As if the twin delights of the Story and Creation modes weren't already enough, *LittleBigPlanet PS Vita* also includes unlockable 'Arcade' titles, which are similar in scope to the bite-sized apps that make the iPhone so popular these days. Scarily polished and playable, all of these titles are worth a considerable amount of your time, but Tapling stands out as the most enjoyable. It borrows *Limbo*'s low-fi visuals and combines them with physics-based puzzle action, and could quite easily have constituted a standalone PSN release – yet it's being offered as one bonus among many in this already-impressive package.

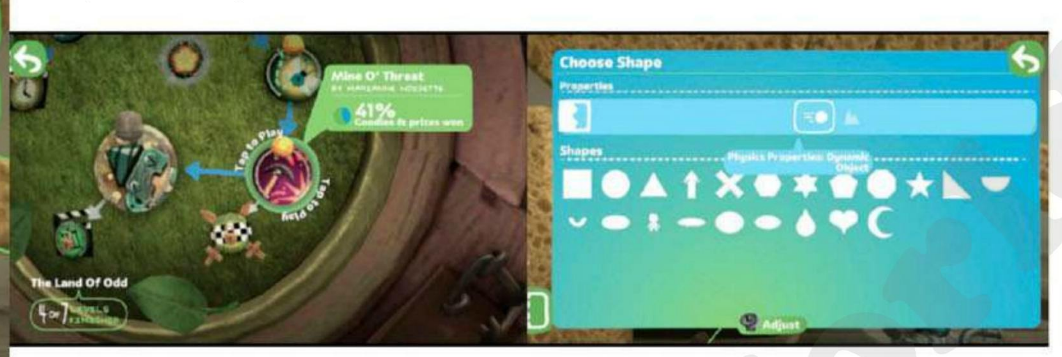
What makes *LittleBigPlanet PS Vita* all the more stunning is its portable nature; what you're getting here is a mobile game studio, a construction tool that allows almost limitless licence to experiment. This aspect – coupled with the ability to share your creations with a global audience, which could number in the millions in the not-too-distant future – makes this remarkable release even more astounding. What's more, this is a game that proves beyond all doubt that, despite the seemingly inexorable rise of smartphone gaming, there are some experiences that simply cannot be replicated using a touch screen alone; *LittleBigPlanet PS Vita* manages to harness all of the hardware's best features to achieve an intoxicating brew of whimsical platforming and bleeding-edge user creation, a true best of both worlds. If you own a Vita, our advice could not be more simple: you should buy this game. If you don't own a Vita, then you need to think long and hard about how to get your hands on one.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

REACH OUT AND TOUCH: At first glance it might appear that *LittleBigPlanet PS Vita* is simply an incremental upgrade, but the addition of touch controls and more powerful creation tools elevates it.

A WORLD AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

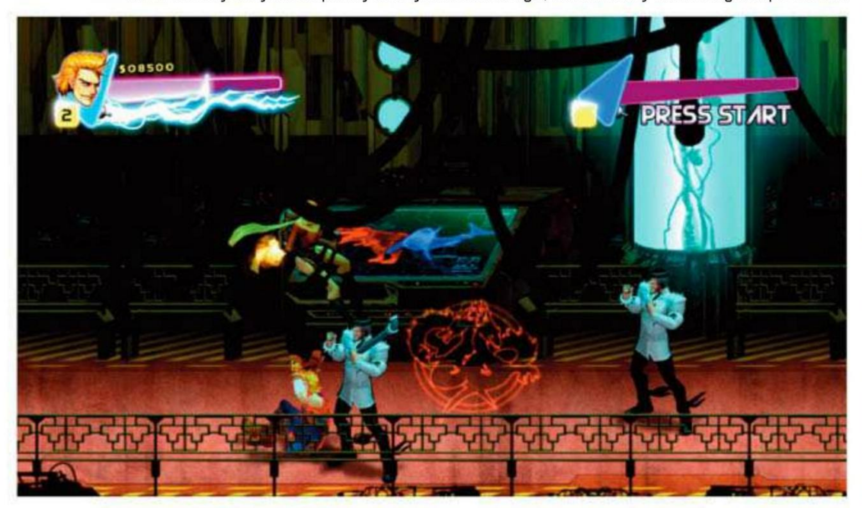
LittleBigPlanet PS Vita incorporates all of the level-creation tools witnessed in the second PlayStation 3 outing, as well as a few new additions that make good use of the console's unique interface. The brand new tools utilise the motion sensor and touch panels, offering an even greater level of customisation over the stages you create. As before, once you're happy with your work, you can publish it on the PlayStation Network, where other players can rate it and give feedback. Naturally, you can do the same to their levels, creating an incredibly accommodating sense of community – and all from a title that slips effortlessly into your pocket for those long and dull commutes to work. Bliss.

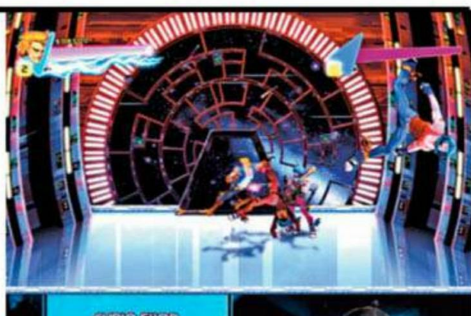




A WONDROUS PLAYGROUND IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND

Below: The Glean is a handy dodge attack that's tricky to use but pays dividends when you successfully pull it off. Time it correctly and you'll temporarily boost your attack strength, which is handy when facing multiple enemies.







Above: Certain levels have shops that can be visited to enhance existing stats. Some shops are well hidden, though, meaning you'll have to do a little bit of exploration in order to find them.

PROOF THAT YOU CAN TEACH AN OLD DRAGON NEW TRICKS

Double Dragon Neon

You have to hand it to WayForward. In one deft swipe, it has not only made the archaic beat-'em-up relevant again, but has rebooted arguably the genre's most important game.

Double Dragon Neon works because WayForward has put the emphasis firmly on having fun. The brothers cheesily high five to activate special moves, the franchise-aware Skeletor soundalike of a boss sings a hilarious song that you can sing along to as the credits roll, and finishing each level sees the brothers furiously play air guitar. The cheesy soundtrack is also glorious, remixing the original music and hit Eighties songs in general. It's completely irreverent, but it works, giving this brawler a charming personality that so many other games lack.

There's more to *Neon* than just sly in-jokes and crazy slapstick, though, as WayForward has also delivered a solid fighting engine that offers a surprising amount of flexibility as you battle through ten varied stages. Hardcore fans will bemoan the loss of signature moves like the head kick and elbow, but new moves like grabbing stunned opponents and bashing their heads together, or briefly enhancing your attacks with a carefully timed dodge, make up for it.

The core move set is further enhanced by the many mix tapes that the brothers can collect. Picking up cassettes from defeated enemies allows you to power up a number of attacks. Passive skills range from letting your brother dish out more damage for every strike he makes without being hit to recovering energy on a successful attack; magic bonuses allow everything from flinging fireballs to summoning a screen-clearing dragon.

Grabbing additional tapes enhances said skill to a level cap of ten, but this figure can be increased to 50 by visiting the Tapesmith and paying him the required amount of Mythril. It's a neat system that requires plenty of experimentation, especially as certain fighting styles are more relevant against specific enemies.

Unsurprisingly, *Double Dragon Neon* really comes into its own when you play with a second player, opening up the gameplay massively and capturing the spirit of the original 1987 arcade game. It's somewhat baffling, then, that *Neon* doesn't currently offer an option for playing online, although we've been assured that such a feature will be coming via a future patch.

For all its power-ups and level variety – your ten-stage quest takes you from the familiar streets of the original game to deep space and through mysterious laboratories – *Double Dragon Neon* does inevitably suffer from over-familiarity, while the later difficulty levels require a fair amount of grinding in order to make progress in them. It's all put together with so much love for both its source material and the Eighties in general, though, that you'll be having far too much fun to actually notice.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Majesco Entertainment
DEVELOPER: WayForward Technologies
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: FINAL FIGHT: STREETWISE

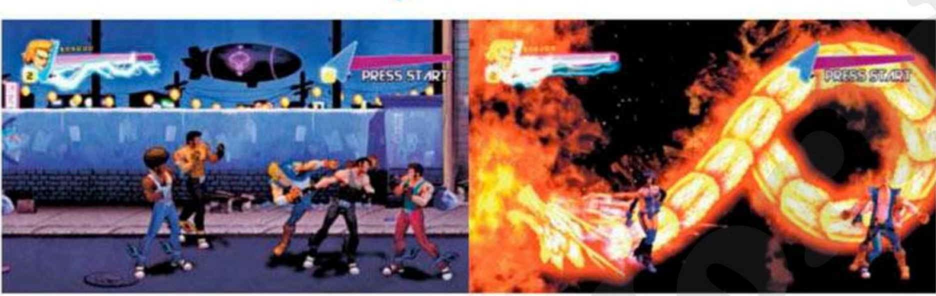


WORSE THAN: DOUBLE DRAGON

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ONLINE FISTICUFFS: *Double Dragon Neon* excels as a multiplayer game, so the sooner WayForward adds the promised online multiplayer support through a patch, the happier we'll be.





VERDICT 7/10

WAYFORWARD MAKES BEAT-'EM-UPS FUN AGAIN

IT SEEMS EVERY CLASSIC FRANCHISE IS GETTING A REBOOT. IS THIS ONE OF THE GOOD ONES?

Fire Pro Wrestling

Below: He's not even topless. That's a skin-coloured jumper! Wrestlers totally need to be topless so they can show off their sculpted pectorals.



The West wasn't always the best place to find a high-end wrestling title. In fact, Japan was leading the charge as recently as 2001 with a series known as *Fire Pro Wrestling*. While it wasn't a franchise loaded with licenses and endorsements, *FPW* captured the magic better than any WWE or TNA experience could hope to, and it did so without featuring the likenesses of our favourite stars. Back then, *Fire Pro Wrestling* was an importer's dream, with a healthy, identifiable roster and a slew of gritty match types.

Fast forward to 2012, however, and this long-anticipated reboot has become less a resurgence and more a bastardisation.

Now a platform for Xbox avatars, *Fire Pro Wrestling*'s roster is full of friends and family. Worst of all, match types are back to basics, barely supported by the game's haphazard frame rate.

Fortunately, the career mode just about makes the 800 Points asking price worthwhile. The avatar assigned to your Gamertag can be taken on the road, from backyard barbecues to Madison Square Garden sellouts, in a bid to become the best in the world. It's both varied and vast, featuring a few tongue-in-cheek jibes at real wrestlers.

During matches, you'll earn experience points for competing against and defeating enemies, which can be spent in a locker room hub to buy new taunts, moves and costume types. Each move has a damage, fatigue, appeal and interval rank, which draws on a player's attributes. As characters gain levels they also earn points used to bolster permanent elements such as toughness and luck.

Despite the strategic foundations that *Fire Pro Wrestling* seems to boast, its combat is infatuated with nonsensical button-mashing. When grappling, you simply press the opposite button to your opponent to ensure you're not countered. Then, when sprawled out on the canvas, you'll need to mash buttons so you can get back to your feet and avoid being pinned. The fun factor is short-lived.

The game's quality is further marred by poor coding. Avatars will stand in the front row, completely faceless. More often than not, your character will appear in the ropes, even when the game thinks they're still in the ring. Most hilariously, Gamertags are not always assigned to the right model.

To cap it off, the online matchmaking is completely unbalanced and therefore not the least bit entertaining. The game matched us, at level 17, with someone at level 67. While we made a respectable account of ourselves, the individual with better stats and moves quite convincingly won every exchange and, inevitably, the match itself.

Resurrecting the *Fire Pro Wrestling* name and affiliating its legacy with this title is baffling. Fun gameplay and decent career mode aside, this is a sideshow insult to our memories. Forget its roots, however, and *FPW* can be an occasionally entertaining skirmish.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Spike Chunsoft
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: WWF WRESTLEFEST



WORSE THAN: ANY SMACKDOWN GAME

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FAME!: Fame Points earned can be used to buy cool new gear for your avatar. Or not so cool. But it's moot anyway, because it's much more fun when your friends' avatars are dressed as Optimus Prime.

VERDICT 4/10

A CLASSIC BURIED BENEATH 21ST CENTURY GOOFINESS



Above: Wrestlers tend to like the taste of canvas. In fact, if locker room gossip is to be believed, they lick it up and down when capacity crowds aren't watching.



NOBODY PUTS GAMES™ IN THE CORNER

Just Dance 4

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Wii, Wii U
ORIGIN: Europe
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

MICHAEL JACKSON: THE EXPERIENCE



WORSE THAN



DANCE CENTRAL 2



Above: Another area where *Just Dance* loses ground to *Dance Central* is its difficulty. While Harmonix's game changes the complexity of its moves in relation to the skill level, *Just Dance* throws you in at the deep end.



The dance genre has benefited enormously from Kinect and motion control, relegating the clunky mats of the last generation to the attic. Dance games are now about big screen, big living room extravaganzas like *Dance Central* and *Just Dance*. It's about getting your friends together to have fun, jump around and be amazed that a videogame is able to interpret your embarrassing wiggles. It's an illusion, of course, but one we're happy to maintain as long as the underlying technology is able to keep up and ensure the curtain hiding the inner workings is tied down tight.

The problem is Kinect isn't the most accurate of inputs, and after the joys of a *Just Dance* party have subsided, your guests already halfway to the nightclub, what you end up with is quite a shallow and weird-looking dance game. *Just Dance 4* doesn't hide the lack of movement recognition particularly well, too. Its on-screen dancers jig and jive away like there's no tomorrow, but the visual feedback is minimal. It's hard to say whether this is intentional or not, but it's rare for your dance moves to have any correlation with those of your on-screen partner.

This dancer and game relationship is also hampered with ill-conceived dance instructions that are impenetrable to begin with, and then, once you've run through the songs a number of times, pretty much useless. This is an area where Harmonix's *Dance Central* achieves relative success, finding a balance between its move set's complexity, dance difficulty and player understanding.

Unfortunately, *Just Dance 4* has also inherited the habit of its predecessors of making dancers move about too much or forcing them to look away from the screen. It makes it very difficult for obvious reasons. This is based on jiving with friends, and *Just Dance 4* wears its party game heart on its sweaty sleeve. In reality, this is all about having fun while moving around to music with the minimum of engagement from the game itself. There's a huge array of songs to choose from, which should keep you busy for months, a challenge mode, and an exercise option.

Ubisoft has also included a *SingStar*-like video clip network and marketplace. It's the perfect fit for the genre and, like *SingStar*, should see most of us making fools of ourselves in seconds. All in all, *Just Dance 4* is an odd mix of quality and worthwhile features that is ultimately let down by lacklustre and confusing dance gameplay.

It's a shame that *Just Dance 4* can't offer the same engagement and considered dance moves of Harmonix's streetwise series. Though it lacks the obvious immediacy of *Dance Central*, *Just Dance 4* compensates with a plethora of options and a foot-tapping song list that turn it into the perfect party game and workout aid. Just don't expect any accurate feedback.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MANGLED MENU: *Just Dance 4* uses a curious new UI navigation technique that asks you to 'push' buttons to choose options. It's among the worst uses of Kinect yet, and that's saying something.



Above: *Dance Central*'s characters will glow in the corresponding body part if you start to lose your rhythm. In contrast, *Just Dance 4* gives you nondescript cryptic hints like 'Crazy', which give no real indication of whether you're succeeding or failing.

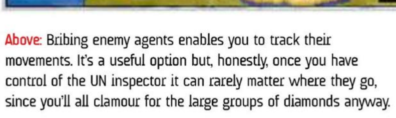
VERDICT 6/10
NOT QUITE THE TIME OF OUR LIFE

Below: As simple as it is to control – simply drag and drop your agents where you want them to go – more could be done to smooth the whole process. Too many buttons and 'Okay' presses can make it a grind.








Above: Bribing enemy agents enables you to track their movements. It's a useful option but, honestly, once you have control of the UN inspector it can rarely matter where they go, since you'll all clamour for the large groups of diamonds anyway.

PAYING FOR A DIAMOND DOESN'T MEAN IT ISN'T ZIRCON

Diamond Trust Of London

When it comes to Kickstarter, you're probably on one of two sides: either you'll spend all your money on projects you may never see, or you vehemently believe it's a waste of time and cash. Regardless of which you believe, crowdfunding is approaching an uneasy period where the games that have successfully been funded are appearing and, should they fail to live up to expectations in any way, you can be certain the recent surge in popularity will very quickly dwindle.

This is less of an issue for *Diamond Trust Of London* and its fairly low number of backers, but that doesn't mean it isn't subjected to any of the same concerns. Yes, it's an original idea that wouldn't have happened without Kickstarter, but it's also up against a very difficult market.

The concept is simple, but the execution is complex, and as a strategy game, that's no bad thing. Your objective is to steal as many diamonds as you can within the allotted number of months, using a limited bank of cash to hire agents, pay off enemies or bribe UN officials. The trick, then, is careful money management: ensure your agents are paid more than the opposition and you'll vacuum up the goods. Overextend your finances, however, and you'll waste valuable resources needed to gather the diamonds. It's a game of constant second guesses.

Though a single-player mode is available, *Diamond Trust Of London* really shines when played in multiplayer. It's tricky to learn – you'll need to read the manual for a change – but trying to outwit and deceive a friend is really quite entertaining. As deep as this managing of the minutiae can feel, though, the truth is the complete opposite. You quickly learn that controlling the UN inspector is the key to victory and, although it doesn't guarantee success, whoever gets in there early is likely to find themselves the victor come the end. There are decisions to be made at every stage, meaning it always feels like you're strategising, even if it's as simple as whether or not you should bribe an enemy agent.

Unfortunately, there's actually very little content packed into *Diamond Trust Of London*. You'll likely get through a single game in half an hour – which is acceptable for multiplayer matches – but there's simply not enough variety, subtlety or scope for experimentation in the strategy of the game to give you the desire for a new match straight away. While the single map available is keenly designed, more is needed to provide $30 worth of longevity. The sad truth is that this would be a perfect £1.99 app purchase and not much else. Ultimately, you should look at it this way: there are already digital games that cost less than *Diamond Trust Of London* and provide considerably more content, and they managed to get made and released without Kickstarter. Keep an eye out for a possible App Store release instead.

DETAILS

FORMAT: DS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: indiePub
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: $30
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TWO FOR ONE: You can play multiplayer with just one cartridge, which is a handy DS feature, particularly for a niche game like this, that seems long forgotten these days.


VERDICT 6/10
A FANTASTIC iOS STRATEGY GAME. ON THE DS

THE EARLY BIRD CATCHES THE WORM, ESPECIALLY WITH A BAZOOKA

Worms Revolution

The only two certainties in life are death and taxes, or so the old saying goes. Whoever coined it was talking rubbish, though, as *Worms* is clearly just as reliably omnipresent. Consoles come and go, franchises crash and burn, but if there's one sure thing, it's that we'll always have *Worms*.

Worms Revolution, the latest from the wriggling, warmongering invertebrates, will be immediately familiar to anyone who's spent even a little bit of time flinging kamikaze sheep at friends and family over the last 17 years. You commandeer a small squad of war-hardened worms and take turns slowly chipping away at a rival faction, using all sorts of fun weapons in order to destroy the opposition. *Revolution* sticks pretty resolutely to the tried, tested and trusted formula, but there are a few welcome deviations and upgrades.

First things first, there's a class system present. Heavy worms have a penchant for heavy weaponry but are naturally slow, and scout worms are a bit quicker and more agile despite having less health, while the scientist worms are generally useless in a skirmish but provide backup in the form of weapon strengthening and health for the rest of your crack team. While a nice addition that perhaps adds some gameplay depth, it doesn't do too much to the core worming experience.

What's more interesting is the use of water physics. You no longer need rely on firepower alone to despatch enemy critters. A few well-aimed shots with a trusty old bazooka and you could find your quarry being overwhelmed by a miniature tsunami. The sense of satisfaction you get, especially in multiplayer, after taking out one or two enemy worms at once with a well-aimed rocket to a reservoir is quite immense. Being able to manipulate the water to your advantage – or, indeed, to your detriment – is a nice addition to the franchise, even if it feels somewhat overdue as a feature.

Reassuringly, the game retains its very silly, British sense of humour. Despite the different engine and gameplay enhancements, Team17 has thankfully decided against the modern penchant for gritty, humourless reboots, and has gone to extra lengths to make *Worms Revolution* the most entertainingly daft in the series yet. Enter actor Matt Berry, the modern day Brian Blessed best known for his booming, golden-voiced characters in *Garth Marenghi's Darkplace* and *The IT Crowd*. He plays a fictional documentary filmmaker called Don Keystone and constantly ribs the player, regardless of progress. Having him take the mick and fire quips at you adds a lot to the relaxed, fun atmosphere.

On the whole, *Worms Revolution* proves there's life in the old worm yet, its enhancements giving the franchise a fresh set of… legs?

The revolution will not be televised, unless you've got *Worms*.

Below: *Worms Revolution*'s new physics-based shenanigans add a whole new tactical layer to the game, with surprising and satisfying results at times.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

WORMS: ULTIMATE MAYHEM



WORSE THAN



DEATH TANK

ENHANCED

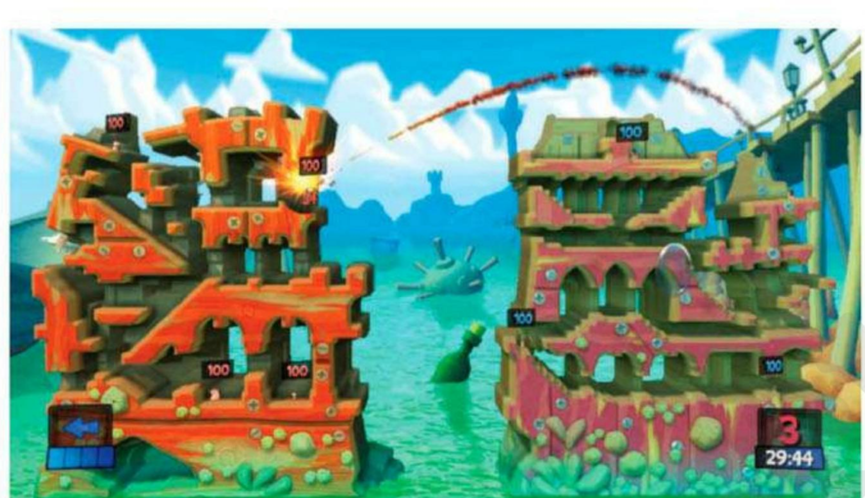
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

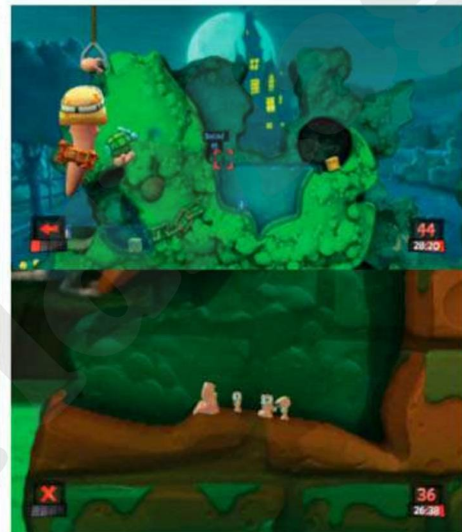
WATER CARRY ON: The new emphasis on water physics adds a nice extra dimension to the gameplay.
2D OR NOT 2D: Team17 has realised *Worms* works best in a 2D plane, although with some 3D flourishes.



VERDICT 8/10

A WINNING FORMULA CAN LAST FOR YEARS





Above: The game has a crisp, colourful look that's neither shamelessly retro nor overly complicated. The perspective is used to very entertaining effect.



LOOKS LIKE HE TOOK A WRONG TURN AT ALBUQUERQUE

Hell Yeah! Wrath Of The Dead Rabbit

As the title does a decent job of suggesting, *Hell Yeah!* is a stupid game. Like, *really* stupid. As the former rabbit king of the underworld, riding in a spinning blade jetpack, your job is to hunt down and kill the 100 monsters who may or may not have seen naked pictures of you. So yeah… Don't say we didn't warn you.

Fusing platforming, shooting and exploration into one package, *Hell Yeah!* sticks Ash the dead rabbit in a series of open-plan levels that house the many and mostly innocent demon targets. Exploration is generally channelled to a point by having doors that only open when you defeat a certain quota of bad guys, but there are still plenty of secrets and short cuts to discover, as well as a faint whiff of Metroidvania from the areas that remain sealed until you return to them further down the line with better powers or more notches on your kill tally.

Shooting is simple, a selection of guns and unlimited, recharging ammo letting you blast away to your heart's content, though platforming is a little more confusing. Rather than a jetpack, it feels like Ash just has a really high, really floaty jump – sometimes it'll seem like it clings to surfaces, while other times it won't quite work properly. Similarly, the dash attack can be erratic and the automated screw attack double jump that Ash gets in the rare instances when he leaves the spinny death wheel leaves you completely devoid of control over where you'll end up.

You'll soon get a feel for the curious handling – few can profess to being experts on how rabbits riding in spiked jetpacks should control, after all – but it doesn't even matter that much anyway. You see, the main attraction here is the cast of ridiculous boss enemies and the assortment of mini-games employed in their defeat. While these repeat a little more than we'd like, most of the *WarioWare*-esque sequences and the victory bloodbath scenes that follow do stand up to repeat viewings, especially with Arkedo eager to chuck in quirky twists to catch you off guard.

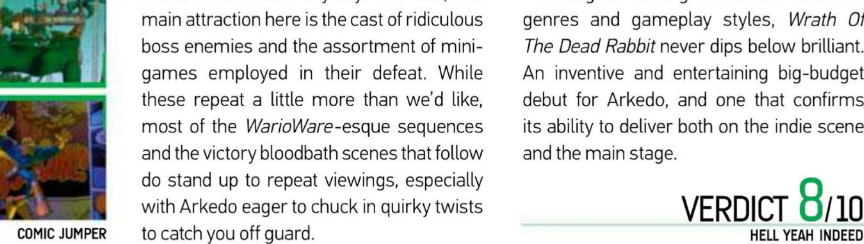
There's a similar variety to gameplay as well, various odd power-ups, bizarre puzzles and even entire genre shifts popping up on the way to the credits. Not knowing what's around the corner is a true delight, Arkedo a mad conductor leading a symphony of nonsense that builds to daft crescendo after daft crescendo. There's even a suitably pointless extra mode where you can put all the monsters you've defeated to work in a post-death camp, netting you a few extra pennies or the odd new hat.

Swing as it might between different genres and gameplay styles, *Wrath Of The Dead Rabbit* never dips below brilliant. An inventive and entertaining big-budget debut for Arkedo, and one that confirms its ability to deliver both on the indie scene and the main stage.

VERDICT 8/10
HELL YEAH INDEED

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Arkedo
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CRAZY TRAIN: Like Twisted Pixel's generally silly games, *Hell Yeah!* flirts with all manner of gameplay types and genres rather than settling on just one. Good luck trying to work out what it actually is…



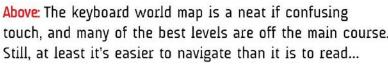


Above: References to other games and popular culture are too numerous to even begin to count. And while a loading screen message claims they're all from a 17th Century Russian book, we're not sure we quite believe that…

Below: Bosses like Lugia don't tend to be that hard once you work out hand placement for dealing with their special attacks. The powered-up later version, though? Don't get us started.







Above: The keyboard world map is a neat if confusing touch, and many of the best levels are off the main course. Still, at least it's easier to navigate than it is to read…



NINTENDO HOSTS A SPELLING BEEDRILL

Learn With Pokémon: Typing Adventure

As peripherals go, the DS keyboard is right up there with the PS3 in-car adaptor and the N64 dance mat in terms of actual usefulness. It's something made all the more ridiculous by the touch-screen functionality of the DS's lower screen, although in its defence, the official accessory is a sleek and tidy piece of kit. The 'game' that comes with it, though? Yeah, not so much…

Bolting together the disparate elements of catching Pokémon and practical education, *Typing Adventure* is a noble attempt to use the strength of the brand for good in a world where many youngsters will likely learn to type before they can write. In that respect and in presentation – where it's rare for a *Pokémon* game to falter, in truth – *Typing Adventure* looks fairly strong at first, although it isn't long before the cracks start to show through. It rapidly becomes clear that quick hands aren't the only thing you'll need to pass the 60 tests presented here – an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things *Pokémon* is also an absolute requirement. Do you know exact spellings of nonsense names like Roggenrola, Conkeldurr and Feraligatr? Obviously you do now, but there are hundreds more to memorise, as well as levels where speed bonuses are reliant on spotting silhouettes or identifying digital cries, which is lunacy that can only impede the usefulness of this title as a practical aid.

It doesn't fare much better as a game either, to be honest. While it slowly builds from asking for the first letter or two of a monster's name to requiring the full thing, this in itself is a problem. Get carried away and tap one letter too many – particularly annoying and frequent when you're asked for all bar one letter of a name and instinctively try to finish it – and you'll drop your combo and cripple your score. Similarly, going back to these early stages with the training wheels off is an exercise in futility, since you'll never catch as many critters with full names as you did when just a few letters was enough. It's a shame, too, since a few of the levels, especially later on, flirt with some interesting ideas.

Ultimately, though, Pikachu's latest and arguably strangest outing ends up carving itself an insanely deep niche – most people looking to improve their typing will likely struggle with the oddly hardcore *Pokémon* barrier, while those looking for a slightly different monster-catching experience will be lucky to have any patience left beyond the two-hour mark, when the credits roll. It's naturally meant to be played regularly beyond this point, though the fact that only those in the sliver of crossover in this Venn diagram will do so suggests that maybe, just maybe, this is a game every bit as actually useful as a DS keyboard is necessary.

DETAILS

FORMAT: DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ROGGEN-WHAT?: As much as the game may help improve keyboard navigation and typing speed, it's all for nothing if you can't recognise most Pokémon from shape and/or sound.

VERDICT 4/10

WORTH A CURSORY GLANCE AT BEST

LET'S GET READY TO GRUMBLE

Joe Danger 2: The Movie

DETAILS
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Hello Games
PRICE: 1,200 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
EXCITEBIKE 64



WORSE THAN
TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3

***Joe Danger 2: The Movie* is old-school in both its gameplay and the way it communicates its world and rules to players.** If you remember the days when games merely started, handed you a gun/skateboard/sword and told you to get on with it, you'll be right at home. If you're more accustomed to being babied through the openings of games, however, there's a very real chance that the opening 20 minutes might culminate in more violence outside the screen than in it.

It's infuriating in the way that only videogames can be. 'Come on,' you think. 'It's just *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* via *Trials* with some wacky vehicles.' Then you start, you die, you restart, you're not told how to do any tricks, stuff keeps killing you, you finish the level and see your friends' scores, and you weep softly. How did they get 45 million on a level, when you can't break a single million? Then you get better, or you quit. Just like old times. Screw *Joe Danger 2: The Movie*, and screw its stupid name. It's the game's fault, not ours.

In a way, that's true. *Joe Danger 2* could really do with a dedicated tutorial mode, just to ease you into things. Stretching these lessons out across a couple of hours of the game proper seems like a good idea, but really it is confusing and irritating. Especially when you consider that, unlike the original *Joe Danger*, there's a multitude of vehicles, each with different handling and even gameplay styles to pick up and learn.

And then you realise that the game actually is babying you; it's just that your friends are better than you and that burning hatred of the game is, in fact, an unstoppable desire to better them if it takes your forever and a day. Like we said: old-school. Not perfect, nor particularly elegant, but there is some logic in how it does things.



Above: Speeding to the finish line is rarely a good idea. A timer penalises you for taking too long, but there's also a stat saying how much faster than others you were.

Below: Once you've proven yourself in the movie-themed campaigns, you can then test your skills in the deleted scenes. Patience is the key to getting through these.

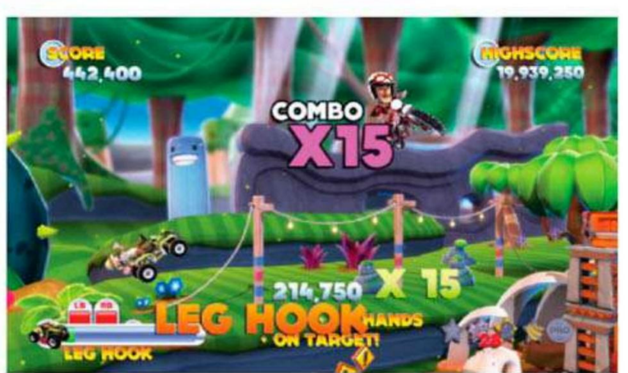
FAQs

Q. I LOVED JOE DANGER!
That's more of a statement, but cool.

Q. WILL I LIKE THIS?
That's more like it. Yes, you will.

Q. DO YOU WANT TO PLAY MY LEVEL?
No. Never.

Below: Tricks are important to getting the big scores, but it's all about layers if you really want to challenge.



BUILD 'EM UP, KNOCK 'EM DOWN

After you're done competing against your friends on the courses that Hello Games has created for you, it's time to build your own levels. If you've played *LittleBigPlanet* you'll be right at home here, and even if you haven't, picking up and placing the elements of the track couldn't be simpler. There's a vast array of toys to choose from to complete your own whirling dervish of pain, but as ever it's making a coherent track that's the hard part. Of course, you can download other players' tracks as well – we're sure there's going to be some absolutely brutal creations kicking around by now – and there's a voting system to make sure your favourite stays at the top.

IF YOU'RE THE COMPETITIVE TYPE, MEET JOE DANGER. HE'S A RIGHT BASTARD, BUT YOU'LL WARM TO HIM

Joe Danger 2 isn't about finishing the six chapters that comprise Movie mode and the even more difficult 'deleted scenes' that follow, nor getting big scores as you do so. Those levels are your lessons, in both how to play the game and how to understand its layers. The little reminders you get at the end of the stage about how insignificant your score is are to be ignored for now. It's about beating your friends, and user-unfriendly as it is to get essentially no assistance at the start of the game, soon you'll have learned the ropes and be ready to challenge.

Most new games are about constantly going forward; *Joe Danger 2*, in contrast, is about going back, learning the rules and then challenging, not having it all handed to you on the first run. Each of the chapters comprises a different theme – *Indiana Jones*-style minecart races, futuristic jetpack jaunts – and each has a different set of levels and vehicles to suit. And then each of those levels has different rules to adhere to and insta-death pitfalls to avoid.

This initial complexity starts off bewildering, swings by frustrating, and then finally becomes freeing. Because, like the old *Tony Hawk* games, the best runs are about mixing your individual flair with the rules of the game. Once this penny drops, the game becomes infinitely more enjoyable, and those high scores, once gargantuan and unattainable, are up for grabs if you've got what it takes.

This being a sequel, Hello Games has added more features, for both good and ill. The upside should be that there's more variety in the levels you play and how you approach them; after all, isn't skiing away from an avalanche about as far away from riding a unicycle as you can get?

In theory yes, but in practice some of the new vehicles dilute the experience. The jetpack doesn't really suit the game's style, hilarious as it is, and its inherently floaty handling coupled with the close camera doesn't tally with a game that's all about the fine control.

Other vehicles fare better. We're fans of the unicycle and the constant battles to stay upright, but functionally there's no real difference between the skis and the minecart. Aesthetically it's a nice change of pace, sure, but we'd have preferred to stay on the motorbike to be honest, and we'd also have liked more straight trick fests, without the environmental interruptions and constant deaths.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

WE DON'T NEED WHEELS: The selection of new vehicles is the obvious difference between *Joe Danger* and its sequel, although we'd hasten to add that some of them aren't all that fun to play.

Your mileage may vary, but we know that when it all comes together and you've learned the stages, the pitfalls, the jumps, the grenade bounce heights and the best trick spots, when you've learned how to keep a combo going for an entire level and get all the stars, and when you've realised that the game isn't purely about pace and never really was, that's when *Joe Danger 2* starts to sing. If you're buying it to play on your own, we'd be tempted to tell you not to bother. Global leaderboards are featured, of course, but this is a game about competing against friends.

Like illustrious forebears in the score attack/total frustration genre, *Joe Danger 2: The Movie* will annoy as much as it delights. Don't be fooled by the cutesy graphics and sound; Hello Games wants you dead and the levels it built are happy to oblige. There are times when you'll consider that maybe, despite your endless improvements, the deck is stacked against you too much, and we can't help but feel like Hello has gone wide when it could have gone deep, expanding the game by adding more tricks rather than more vehicles. If you're the competitive type, however, meet Joe. He's a right bastard, but you'll warm to him.





VERDICT 8/10

HARSH, AT TIMES NOT EVEN FAIR, BUT ADDICTIVE



HEARTH, WIND AND FIRE

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Hearthfire

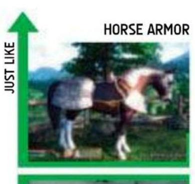
Build a house, fill it with furniture and kids. *Skyrim*'s second piece of DLC isn't extensive in what it offers, bolting on another system of progression that lets players feel like they own a bit of the game's colossal world. With three properties in geographically diverse locations, *Hearthfire* is an utterly straightforward, basically quest-free addition that doesn't afford as many options for customisation as it should.

After your hero is approached by a courier, one of three Jarls will offer a plot of land for 5,000 gold. You're then free to build a house there via a menu screen; expand it with a main hall, wings, stables and other touches; and drop furniture into these new rooms to spruce them up. Crucially, though, you can't decide where everything goes, so the end result is basically preset. You can eventually adopt a couple of children, where a *Fable II*-esque life of barren mediocrity can begin, before you try your best within the game's mechanics to ostracise the whole lot of them.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 400 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

JUST LIKE: HORSE ARMOR



WORSE THAN: DAWNGUARD



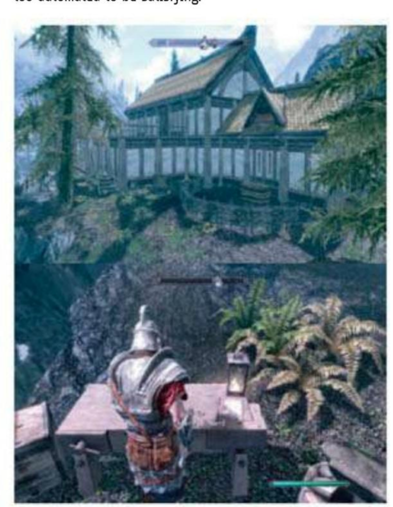
The question of *Hearthfire*'s worth lies in what kind of relationship you have with *Skyrim*. This isn't a licence to build a dream home; it's just a little concession to players who want to make this immense landscape a touch more personal. Building a house requires tens of thousands of gold, as well as the patience to travel endlessly to merchants, gathering materials. The latter factor, in particular, means it takes longer to get a property you're happy with than it really should, and therefore the process becomes unnecessarily tedious.

Hearthfire is an entirely cosmetic extra for the console player who needs another ongoing project, or alternatively, PC users not au fait with the extensive range of mods that already serve these needs. *Hearthfire* won't enrage Bethesda fans who might have felt the sting of poor value DLC in the past, but it doesn't function with any particular flair.



HOME WITHOUT THE HEART

Below: The end result of your immense spending and resource gathering is insultingly dull. Even with the ability to adjust the wings on your house, choosing between armouries or alchemy labs, depending on your needs, it's too automated to be satisfying.



PUNY HULK

Avengers Initiative

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Disney Interactive
DEVELOPER: Marvel Entertainment
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 4.1

BETTER THAN: IRON MAN

WORSE THAN: INFINITY BLADE II



It was no less than the biggest facepalm in the industry as last summer's cinematic superhero mash-up, *The Avengers*, arrived remiss of a videogame accompaniment. Suffice to say, some $1.5 billion at the box office later and developers and publishers across the land have been pushed to furiously cobble together belated tie-ins that will capitalise on all that wonderful green stuff.

Speaking of green stuff, the first official tie-in out of the gate, *Avengers Initiative*, stars the not-so-jolly green giant, Hulk, in a rather uninspired action role-playing game. It's more or less a straight rip-off of Epic's *Infinity Blade*, with the giant green rage monster roaming around dilapidated urban areas, punching extraterrestrial visitors very hard in the phizog.

It's an appropriate template for the licence, but sloppy implementation of key gameplay features can often leave *Avengers Initiative* looking like a poor imitator – or a Skrull, if you're a nerd like us. Melee combat involves swiping at the screen to bring those giant pea-coloured fists down on a multitude of enemies, but skirmishes can lack coherency, with poorly telegraphed enemy moves and half-explained mechanics.

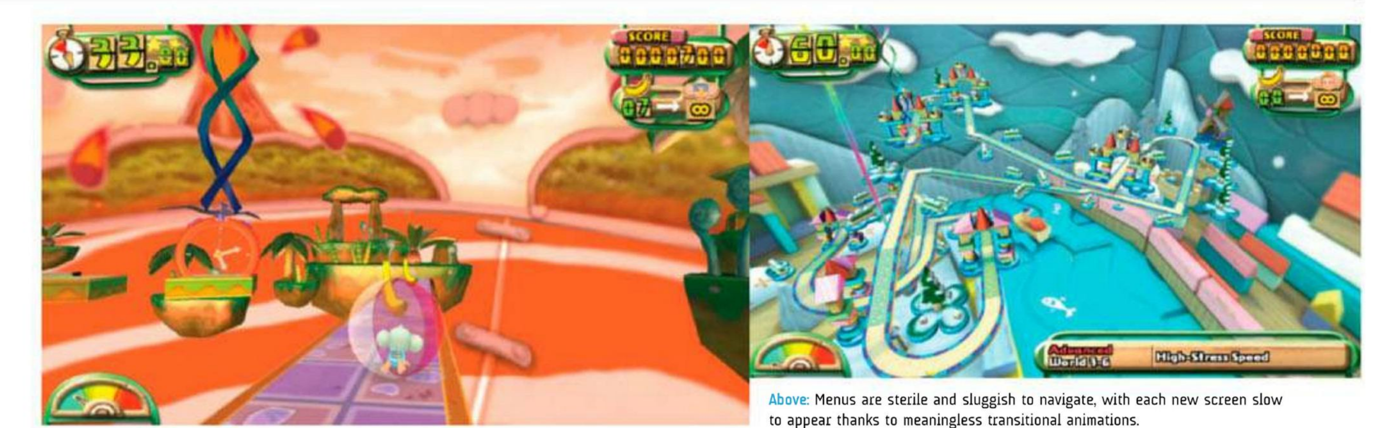
You can strut Hulk down multiple pathways, but the lack of enemy variation will soon grow tiresome and, aside from some enjoyable boss encounters, the dutiful exploration is exacerbated by the DayGlo visuals that lack both verve and distinction. The inclusion of finishing moves is a welcome addition and brings a touch of the cinematic to the end of fights, but it's a shame that this flash of inventiveness is absent throughout the majority of the game.

With planned free updates starring Thor, Iron Man and Captain America, there's certainly plenty of potential in the root concept, but the initiative needs some rethinking if it wants to be more than just passable but throwaway entertainment.

Below: The *Infinity Blade* comparisons aren't limited to the combat. ISO-8 gems are collectable currency found throughout levels that can be used to buy combat upgrades and new Hulk skins.



AN ENJOYABLE QUEST HAMPERED BY ITS DERIVATIVENESS



Above: Menus are sterile and sluggish to navigate, with each new screen slow to appear thanks to meaningless transitional animations.

FYFFE OUT OF TEN

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Splitz

Every new *Monkey Ball* game arrives riding a wave of cynicism crested with a light spume of optimism: the hope that one day Sega will recapture the lightning it bottled with the first game and subsequently let go if every sequel since is anything to go by. *Banana Splitz* is perhaps the best in the series since *Super Monkey Ball 2*, but don't get too excited; it may not be as offensively bad as the recent iOS and 3DS versions, but this isn't the return to form those with fond memories of the GameCube original would have hoped for.

Initially, it suffers from the same problem as the Wii and 3DS games: the need to cater for two very different control schemes. With tilt functionality failing to offer the nuance of an analogue stick, early levels are laughably basic, many of them lined with barriers that make failure all but impossible. Things pick up in the later stages of Normal mode, by which time the challenge has gently escalated. Then Advanced mode arrives to spoil the party with gimmicks, blind leaps and difficulty spikes aplenty. The very first stage is off-puttingly tricky, and a much sterner test than many that follow, while by this point the gyro sensor is nowhere near capable of handling the fine control required to progress.

Eventually, frustration takes over and your attention turns to the Party games. The initial delight at seeing the return of Monkey Target will be tempered by the fudged execution: launches are automatic, while poor feedback will likely result in your first few shots plummeting into the sea. It doesn't help that the ocean looks distractingly poor, with an amateurish stop-motion effect apparently designed to excuse a splash with roughly four frames of animation. Indeed, the handcrafted visual style is inconsistent throughout, resulting in what looks like a lazy art student's mixed media project. *Monkey Ball* has always been a dazzlingly bright game, but the garish colour scheme seems to be Sega's attempt to release the first Vita game to make its players vomit.

The rest of the asides are the usual mixed bag. One or two make interesting use of the touch capabilities, with some even asking you to hold your Vita vertically, while others use the camera. On one hand, Monkey Billiards is a surprisingly entertaining diversion; on the other, the rear-touch antics of Monkey Rodeo might be the worst thing on Sony's machine so far. It's only beaten in the bizarre stakes by a bafflingly out-of-place credits sequence seemingly lifted from a mid-budget JRPG. *Banana Splitz* is as inconsistent as ever, then, even if for a few moments you'll believe Sega hasn't entirely forgotten what made *Monkey Ball* great in the first place.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 26 October
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: SUPER MONKEY BALL 3D





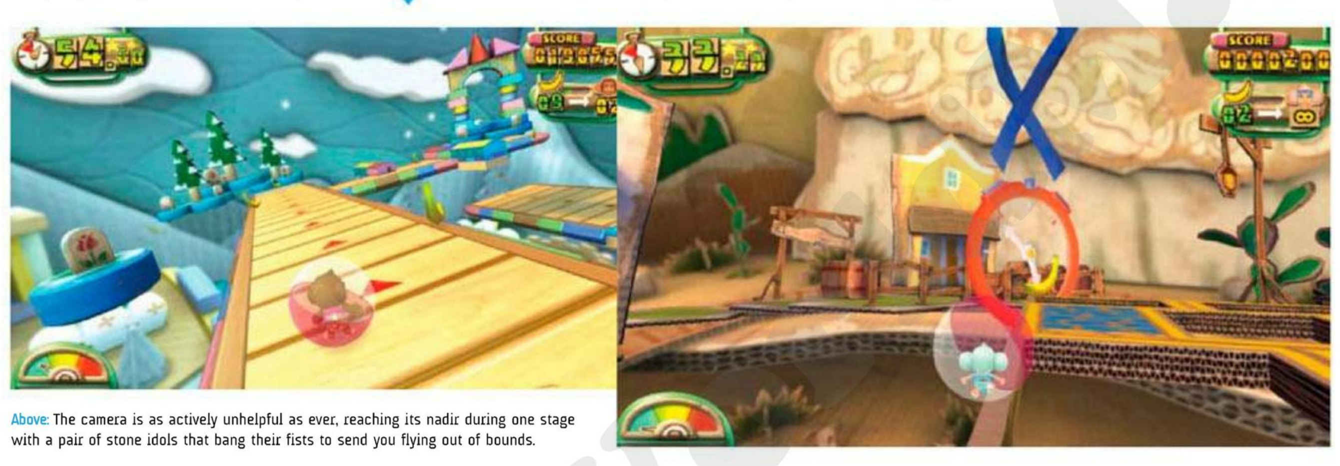
WORSE THAN: SUPER MONKEY BALL 2

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PHOTO FINISH: Take a snap with the Vita's camera and the game will automatically turn it into a playable level. In most cases, however, 'playable' is used in the very loosest sense.



VERDICT 5/10
FAILS ONCE AGAIN TO HIT THE MONKEY TARGET



Above: The camera is as actively unhelpful as ever, reaching its nadir during one stage with a pair of stone idols that bang their fists to send you flying out of bounds.

IS GUITAR HERO BY ANY OTHER NAME JUST AS SWEET?

Rocksmith

"I'd rather just play a real guitar," sneers your musically adept friend as you quickly click between the green button and the red button. "What's the point?" they'd probably ask you. Valid concerns, of course, and it's still pertinent now, even long after the peripheral-fuelled rhythm-action genre has passed on. So where's the validity in *Rocksmith*, Ubisoft's 'real guitar' answer to a genre whose plastic toys have already lived past their use and remain dust-covered in a cupboard somewhere?

The problem with *Rocksmith* is the multiple directions from which any one gamer could approach it. Is it a videogame? Educational software? Are you a guitarist or entirely new to six-string music creation? There are simply far too many questions that need answering before you can understand how useful the game will be for you. Fortunately, there is only one ultimate question: can *Rocksmith* teach you to play the guitar?

As a game, *Rocksmith* is fairly typical of the tropes that *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* set before it all those years ago, and this is both beneficial and detrimental. Watching the colour co-ordinated blocks fly unerringly towards the screen is an action that most gamers will recognise, which makes picking up *Rocksmith* a fairly simple exercise – at least mechanically. But does it really need to be coloured blocks? Haven't we already done that?

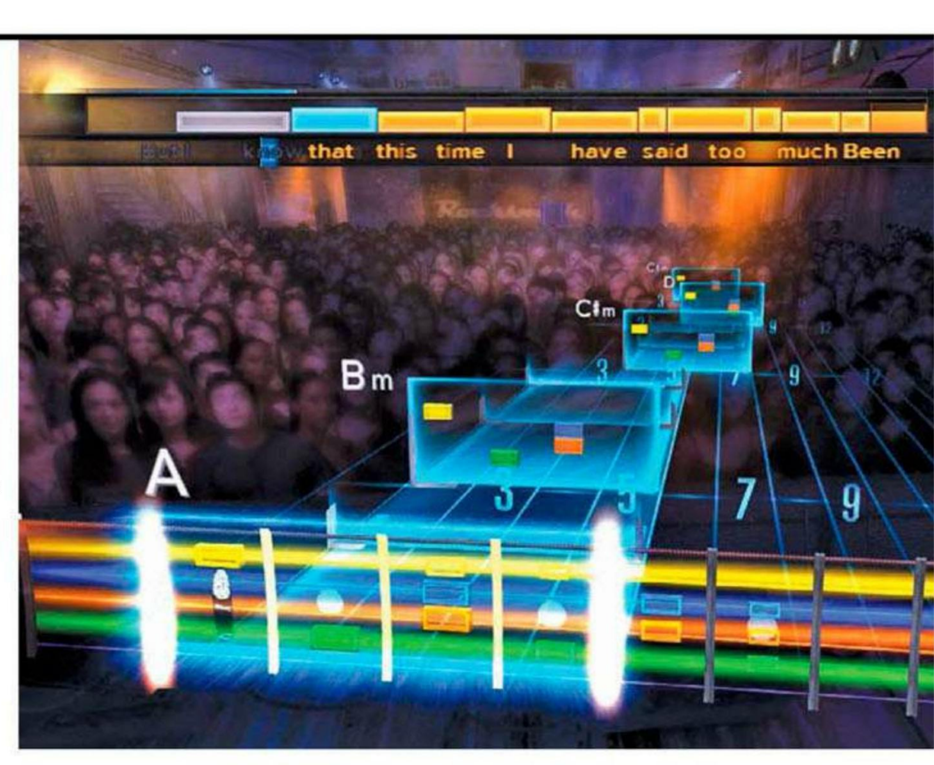
Despite this familiarity, picking up *Rocksmith* for the first time can be intimidating; unless you've been rocking for years, it's going to take a bit of getting used to. Even then, the colour-coded strings replacing the EBGDAE method might throw off even the most skilled of guitarists, as they then have to relearn the way they've been reading tablature for years. This is especially true since it inverts the fretboard, so the thickest string is at the top and the thinnest at the bottom – confusing for anyone used to the opposite with 'real' tablature.

There is a reason for *Rocksmith*'s madness, however. Newcomers will find this a far preferable method, since this setup mirrors how the guitar looks in your hands – making that coloured block recognition all the more simple to understand. This isn't enough to blunt the harsh learning curve, however, as a newbie will need constant glances away from the on-screen notes to find the correct finger placement on the strings.

Mercifully, the software powering *Rocksmith* is really quite impressive. Its ability to detect individual notes and pitches – even during a particularly quick sequence – is outstanding, and really helps force players into ensuring that they're picking the notes

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft San Francisco
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: As confusing as it might look at first, the steady stream of songs manages to ease players into the complex UI.



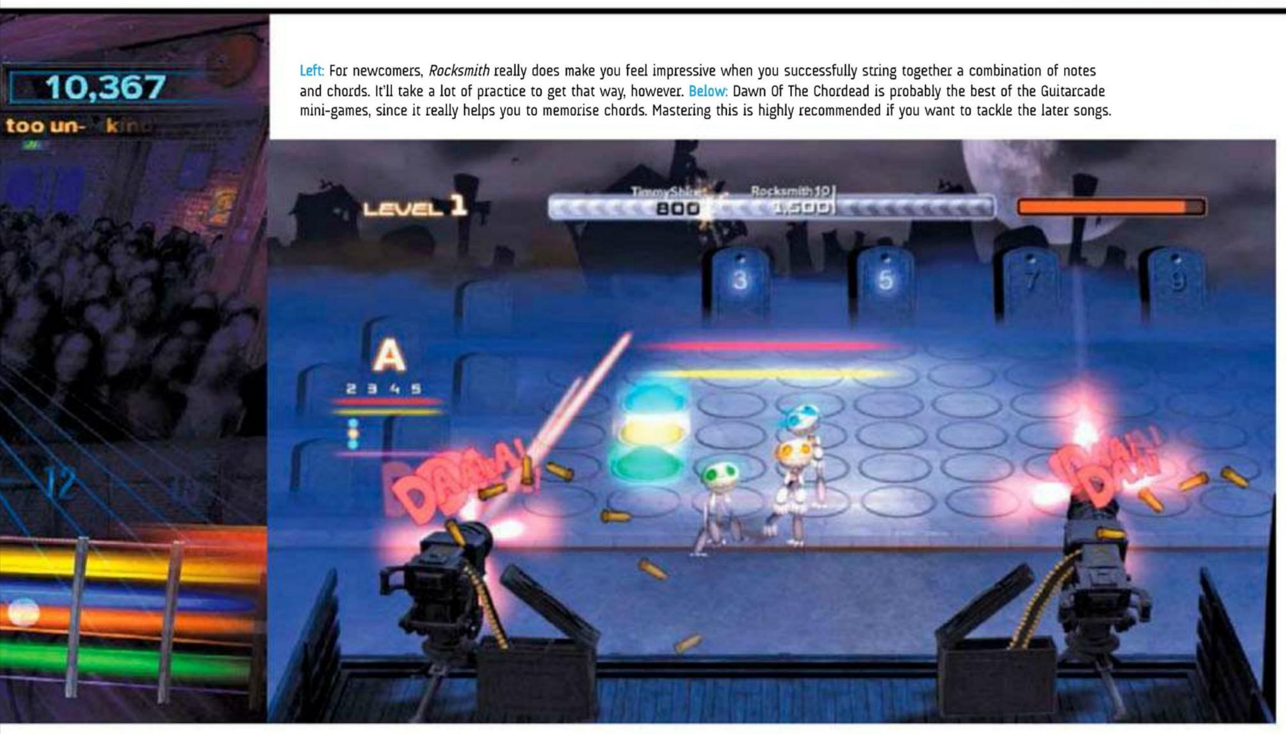
Right: The level of mastery can be customised to better fit your skills, but it's awkward to arrange and is still victim to the dynamic difficulty. A more steady challenge is needed to really help players improve.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

HARD TIMES: It's good software, but in an effort to appeal to everyone Ubisoft will put people off. *Rocksmith* needs to let you select your skill level, which means an experience better suited to you.

UNEXPECTEDLY THROWING AN UNKNOWN CHORD INTO THE MIX SHOULD NOT BE A REWARD FOR MASTERING A SECTION



Left: For newcomers, *Rocksmith* really does make you feel impressive when you successfully string together a combination of notes and chords. It'll take a lot of practice to get that way, however. Below: Dawn Of The Chordead is probably the best of the Guitarcade mini-games, since it really helps you to memorise chords. Mastering this is highly recommended if you want to tackle the later songs.



FAQs

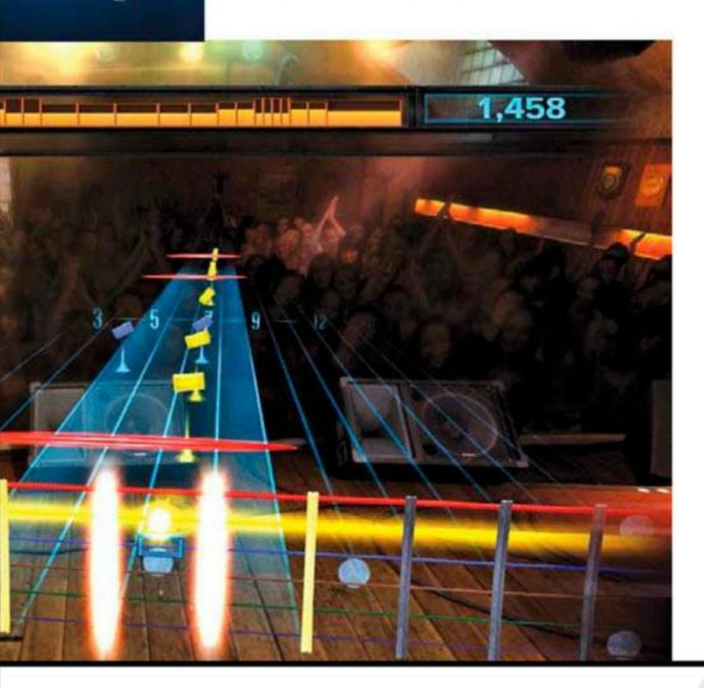
Q. SO IT CAN'T TEACH ME GUITAR?
Yes and no. It'll improve your skills enough to play along, but anything else will need personal drive.

Q. AND THE SET LIST?
A hodge podge of rock. Everything from The Rolling Stones to Soundgarden, and there's plenty of DLC due.

Q. SO NO METALLICA?
Nope. If you want that you'll have to join the masses complaining about the lack of metal.

OFFLINE LAG

Rocksmith and its accompanying 'Realtone' cable do suffer from about a quarter-second lag between the audio and the visuals. It might not sound like much, but believe us when we say it can be distracting. This is thanks to the HDMI cable that, no doubt, so many of you have set up to connect your PS3 or Xbox 360 to the TV. Thankfully, there is a solution: set the console to play audio through a separate optical cable and this problem will be fixed. It does mean that additional wiring is needed to make the best use of _Rocksmith_, but it's probably worth knowing if you're considering the game.



correctly. Get it wrong and arrows will point you up or down the fretboard as required, though admittedly some of this is lost with chord play, which is generally a little too forgiving.

The adaptable difficulty always seems to offer the right level of challenge too, though it's not without its issues. Quickly and unexpectedly throwing an unknown chord into the mix during a song should not be a reward for mastering a section, and often the system doesn't seem to recognise the right areas to increase the difficulty. We hate to say it, but a more traditional preset difficulty selection would be preferable to this great but hugely flawed system.

There are aids in this, however, and it's with these that newcomers to playing the guitar will really see the benefit of *Rocksmith*. Individual events are selected for you as you play, and *Rocksmith* does a fine job of picking out sections you're not handling too well. If you're introduced to a new chord, it'll take you string by string to get the right sound. If you struggle with a particular phase, you can practise until you master it or try to match the original's speed. And if you come across a new technique – from tremolos to slides – it'll offer a set of challenges to practise with until you get it right.

There's more, too. A series of mini-games, which *Rocksmith* calls Guitarcade, provide an entertaining distraction from the endless coloured blocks. Dawn Of The Chordead, for example, sees you matching chords to halt a zombie horde; Quick Pick Dash tasks you with using the tremolo technique in a *Canabalt*-style running game; and Super Ducks is modelled on *Duck Hunt* and requires you to pluck a specific note on a certain string. There are eight in total, and these are actually far better for improving your technique than any of the songs.

And this is the problem with *Rocksmith*. As impressive and innovative as the technology is, it simply won't teach you to play the guitar. Not confidently, anyway. It requires as much self-determination as self-teaching does, and even then it'll only act as a base to improve upon. The fault is not with the technology, but the software. More customisation options are needed to better tailor it for all levels of player.

But again, it is down to what you want from *Rocksmith*. If you're hoping for an entertaining rhythm-action game, you'll need to look elsewhere. Yet if you're a beginner or middling guitarist looking for a way to improve, *Rocksmith* definitely offers enough for you. Admittedly it does have issues, and this is the biggest shame because with something this innovative it needs to excel to succeed. No, *Rocksmith* isn't always fun – sometimes it's downright frustrating – but the biggest criticism is its very niche audience: a selection of people who want to play the guitar but don't have the resolve to put in the hours without some kind of continuous feedback. *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* have already nailed the party attitude, but *Rocksmith* needs to try harder to master this untapped school music teacher approach.

VERDICT 7/10
THERE'S POTENTIAL FOR GREATNESS, BUT IT NEEDS WORK



HINT: READ DOWN THROUGH THE BODY TEXT FOR THE VERDICT

Professor Layton And The Miracle Mask

If you've ever played any of the previous four *Professor Layton* games, you would have noticed his eyes: two empty black dots that bore into your soul, contrasting the whites and pupils of every other character. He stands, always smiling in the face of relentless text boxes, stumbling on diabolical puzzles wherever he goes and solving them with otherworldly confidence while his companions fumble ineptly. That's a mystery we'd like to solve: who is Professor Layton and what is he a professor of? Does he ever take his hat off? Is that his real skin, or did he steal it from the first human he encountered when he stepped off his flying saucer?

These are the thoughts we entertained ourselves with while playing the latest mystery and fifth game in the *Professor Layton* series. A good three quarters of the game is spent tapping, tapping, tapping. Tap to wade through mundane dialogue with one-dimensional characters, tap repeatedly to walk along the path to your intended destination, tap and hold to search a screen for hint coins… We could do this in our sleep.

The puzzles are pretty imaginative, which is fortunate as that's what *Professor Layton* gets sold on, though no one prepares you for the grind that frames each one. From standard observation to much more cerebral puzzles, there's a challenge in here for everyone, and if it becomes too much, you can always use a hint coin to bail yourself out. Complete the puzzle and you'll be rewarded with a fistful of Picarats and the option to play the puzzle whenever you like in the index at the main menu.

With a number of companions including Luke Triton, son of Layton's friend Clark Triton and Emmy Altava, his assistant, the Professor finds himself in Monte d'Or, the City of Miracles. It's here that a villain known as the Masked Gentleman is terrorising the city by turning people into stone – or so it would seem.

Professor Layton And The Miracle Mask is put together with the same polish as before. It's wonderfully animated and it has a 3D mode as well, which makes it look even more like a classic piece of traditional animation. But it's a beautiful veneer, a lot of style over substance and a game that we think puzzle fans will struggle to enjoy when they're required to wade through up to ten minutes of shallow exposition just to get to the next puzzle. It's a no-brainer for the thousands of *Professor Layton* fans, but steer clear if you consider your taste in puzzle games remotely hardcore.



VERDICT 6/10

"I THINK I'VE HAD IT!"

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Level-5
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: 26 October
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

RHYTHM THIEF AND THE EMPEROR'S TREASURE



AS GOOD AS



PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE UNWOUND FUTURE

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

SPOTPASS: Every week for a year following its release, players can download additional puzzles for *Professor Layton And The Miracle Mask*. A total of 365 extra puzzles will be released for download.





Above: Fail a puzzle too many times and you'll score less. Complete it quickly and it'll get sent to your puzzle index, where you can try to improve your previous score.

MINIMAL VISUALS, MAXIMUM FRUSTRATION, HUGE ADDICTION

Super Hexagon

DETAILS

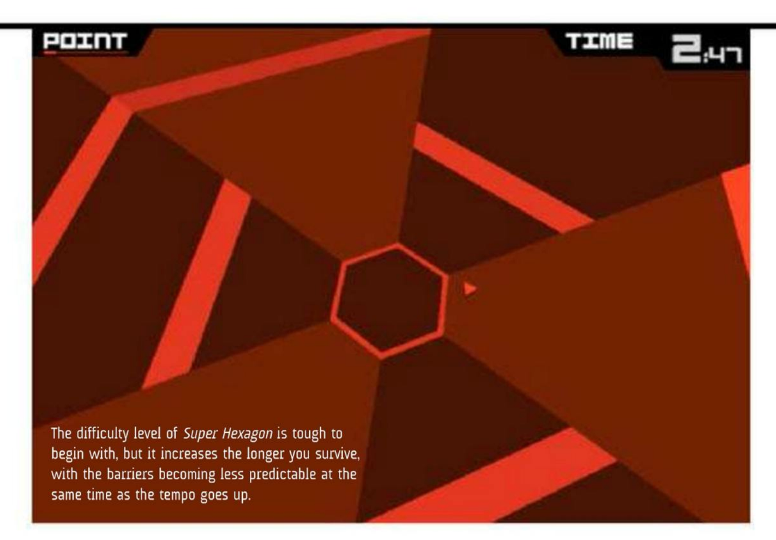
FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Terry Cavanagh
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 4.0
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: GROOVE COASTER

WORSE THAN: BEAT HAZARD ULTRA

When you see a game that lists its lowest difficulty setting as 'Hard', you could be forgiven for thinking it's a title with a chip on its shoulder. However, this classification is perfectly justifiable in *Super Hexagon*, as despite the simplicity of the game visually and in terms of the controls, this game is wickedly difficult.

Fast reactions and strong focus are essential, as you control an arrowhead that orbits a central hexagon. From each of the sides come waves of walls that you must avoid; as they come closer they form multi-sided barriers, and you have to use the simple left/right controls to manoeuvre through this neon maze. While it sounds simple enough, there is plenty to overcome in order to survive past the 20-second mark. The ever-shifting camera angle makes concentration more challenging, playing with your perspective and making spotting gaps harder. At times it's constantly moving, causing genuine dizziness. As well as that, the speed is always increasing, and when combined with the shape-shifting nature of the obstacles, this becomes an assault on your reflexes as well as your vision.



The difficulty level of *Super Hexagon* is tough to begin with, but it increases the longer you survive, with the barriers becoming less predictable at the same time as the tempo goes up.

A solid strategy is to up the level, even when you're struggling with the first one. Yes, you might let out a yelp when you try out the hardest difficulty as all manner of bright green shapes fly at you, but it will make the opening stage feel almost serene when you drop back to it.

The thing about *Super Hexagon* is that your first few games are so terrifying, the pace and intensity of the gameplay catching you so unawares, that when you do start to make headway, it is immensely satisfying. It's that perfect gaming recipe of simplicity and enjoyment that makes a title so memorable, no matter how it looks.

VERDICT 7/10

PREPARE TO LOSE MANY HOURS OF YOUR LIFE

TRY YOUR HAND AT DRAGON TAMING. JUST WATCH YOUR FINGERS

Drakerider

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Witchcraft
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 4.2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: ZENONIA III



WORSE THAN: CHAOS RINGS II

Square Enix has previous when it comes to good-looking RPGs on iOS – you need look no further than the *Chaos Rings* series for evidence – and fans will see plenty of familiarity if they pick up *Drakerider*. The game sees you take control of the mysterious and somewhat amusingly named 'silver-haired lad', who spends most of the game astride his ferocious sidekick, a dragon named Eckhardt.

It is the combination of these two that provides *Drakerider* with its unique control system when in battle. Instead of commands made up of button combinations, players use swipes of the iPhone screen to control the reins of their dragon, and temper his attacks as such. The chains along the bottom of the screen go with a status bar at the top, which is colour-coded, each shade representing a different mode of battle. Pull the reins in tight to restrain your dragon and you can heal his wounds but cause no damage to your enemy. Let Eckhardt too loose, however, and his primal instincts will take over and you soon become the target. It's a very different system and one that takes some real getting used to.



Above: The battle system in *Drakerider* is a unique one, and almost draws your eye away from the actual battle sequence, instead focusing your attention on the reins controlling your dragon and the associated status bar.

Your first battle outside the tutorial will more than likely take several retries before you succeed. The key is patience and use of strategy – all-out attack or nothing but solid defence will get you nowhere. Instead, you need to find the balance between guarding during onslaughts, striking back, and being patient and taking the time to heal. What this means is an extended amount of time spent battling, and this can be no bad thing when the visuals are this good and the control setup this fresh and engaging.

The only sour point for some might be the in-app purchases and the need to spend £14.99 in order to unlock the full game beyond the first chapter. This seems a little steep for an iOS game, even one that is as immersive as this.

VERDICT 6/10

VERY DIFFERENT, BUT FRUSTRATING TO MASTER

BRINGING AN OLD-FASHIONED GAME AT AN OLD-FASHIONED PRICE

Final Fantasy Dimensions

The initial signs don't look good: a *Final Fantasy* spin-off released in 2010 on Japanese mobile phones, updated and ported to iOS two years later and expecting anyone who wants the full package to pay a penny short of £20. However, the initial signs don't take into account the massive power of nostalgia and the desire out there for a 'new' *Final Fantasy* of the 16-bit era.

Final Fantasy Dimensions plugs a gap that most probably didn't even think existed, giving us a neo-16-bit entry in the classic RPG series. Players are presented with sprites that can only move diagonally in cut-scenes, a chiptune soundtrack, what looks very much like Mode 7 scrolling on the world map and – as you might have just picked up – *a world map*. If your favourite *Final Fantasy* came before three discs, the number seven and breakout popularity, you'll find a lot to love in *Dimensions*.

The game takes few cues from modern trends, only really bothering when it comes to saving your progress (see boxout). But generally speaking, this is still *Final Fantasy* as the early Nineties would have it, with little in the way of influence taken from the likes of *Penny Arcade Adventures Episode Three*, for example, which served to streamline the old-fashioned JRPG experience.

No, this is a game where you will sit through line after line of melodramatic nonsense that you will either become absolutely enraptured with or simply not pay attention to. It's a game where you will be hit with random battles so frequently that you begin to assume it's not random at all and the game is just going out of its way to try to kill you. It's a game where you will hit a brick wall and *will* have to grind.

But that doesn't stop it from being fun, nor does it stop *Dimensions* from becoming something of a time sink, should you let it get its claws in. With each chapter of the 13 in total weighing in at two to four hours, they're short enough that you feel you're always making progress while at the same time long enough to feel like there's actual substance in your speedy progression.

One area where it always feels meaty enough is in the job system. Taking cues from *Final Fantasy IV* and *Final Fantasy Tactics*, the latter of which is available on iOS and is highly recommended, players can assign and re-assign the roles of their four main party members as they see fit. While each character has a clear affinity for one talent or another, be it warrior, white mage, summoner, thief or whatever else, the player can choose any job and soon fit that seemingly square peg in a round hole. Plus it means your main hero can be the aforementioned white mage, which never seems to happen in *FF* games.

As you progress, you unlock more jobs with more crossover specialities – a warrior being more suited to becoming a dragoon,

THE PLAYER CAN CHOOSE ANY JOB AND SOON FIT THAT SEEMINGLY SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Matrix Software/Square Enix
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: Animation is limited, movement is restricted, sound is primitive at times, and it's great for all those reasons. This is very much an old-fashioned *Final Fantasy* production and one aimed squarely at a particular sort of fan.

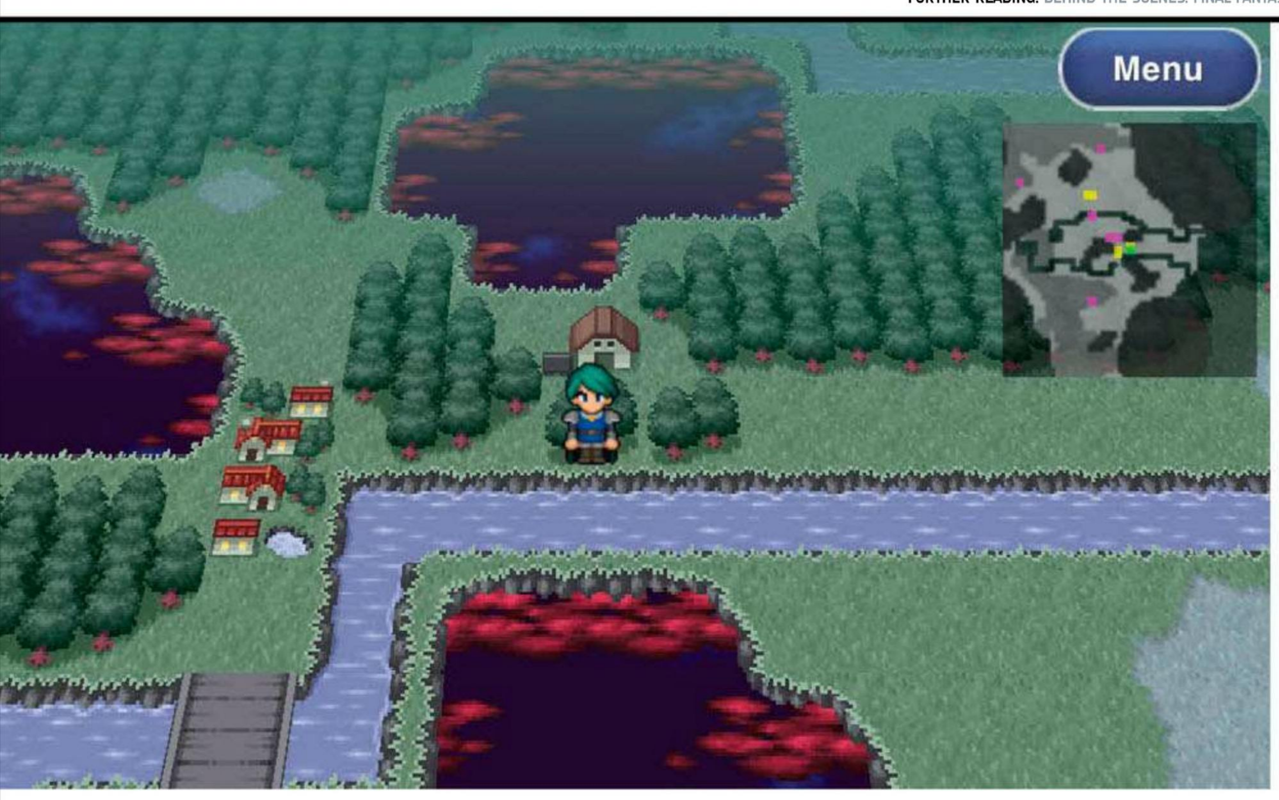


Above: The story follows two separate parties of four characters – the warriors of light and dark, respectively – and a selection of guests. Few really stick out, but it's nice to have a large selection to utilise in the job system.





Right: While the UI is functional and suits iOS devices, it does feel a bit clumsy at times, requiring too many double-taps for our liking.





FAQs

Q. HOW MUCH?
£19.99 for all the chapters, but they are priced individually for those uncertain if they want the whole thing.

Q. AND HOW LONG?
Each chapter clocks in at a few hours, depending on how quickly you can rush through. None feel too short, nor do they outstay their welcomes.

Q. AS GOOD AS FFVII?
It's not a game to compete with the *Final Fantasy* games released from the PlayStation era onwards. This is very much old-school.

SAVE US

Save points – that seemingly ancient method of recording one's progress in the *Final Fantasy* series – make a return. Fortunately, the trend in more recent portable *FF* releases for allowing quick saves has been brought along with *Dimensions*, meaning you can save at pretty much any time. It's a one-shot thing that deletes itself once you reload, so no cheating by spamming the function. Along with quick-saving comes another element that aids portability of the game massively: the ability to put your device to sleep, before waking it and continuing from wherever you left off. It may not seem like much, but in practice it makes a huge difference for those situations when you need to quickly dash off the bus, for example. In real life, that is, not in the game.



for example – which means more tactical thinking is necessary. It's not taxing in any way, but is, in fact, a fun little system to help keep you tinkering throughout the game and provide something more personal in what is otherwise a pretty linear experience. Classic *Final Fantasy*, in other words – you're not going to be making split-second 'who dies?' decisions, instead sticking with the story of crystals, light and dark, dragons and airships as it trundles along at its own happy little pace.

But for its twee look and all-round cutesy feel, *Final Fantasy Dimensions* remembers its old-school, hardcore roots. It's not exactly the sort of challenge that will keep you up sweating at night, but it's hard enough to prove a genuine trial at times. Even if it tends to be overcome more through the aforementioned grinding than by employing any real tactics in a fight. Naturally, it's a case of learning an opponent's weakness and exploiting it, and you'll pick up a standard rhythm of buffs and debuffs to cast in every fight that could give you trouble, but the thought process doesn't go far beyond 'hit them more and harder'. But to say that offers no challenge is to miss the point of what makes classic *Final Fantasy* – or any RPG, for that matter – great: the thrill that comes from getting back to a fight having levelled up and beating ten shades out of a previously unbeatable opponent.

The price is a sticking point and will put off many who might pick up the initial free prologue chapter, there's no denying that. In an era of 69p games that last hours, for a publisher to charge almost 30 times that for its game will be seen as utter madness by many – and in a few ways it is. But there are three factors to consider here. First, it is not a game aimed at the 69p market; it is one for the dedicated, hardcore *Final Fantasy* fan. Second, you get a hell of a lot more content for your money than you do in even the biggest iOS RPGs – dozens of hours to play through. Third, and most importantly, you get a very good take on the classic *Final Fantasy* fare.

It's not a classic in its own right; it's arriving two years later than its initial release; the price, while justifiable, has to be justified in the first place; and anybody weaned on the likes of *Final Fantasy XII* or *XIII* might not be drawn in by the retro styling and somewhat archaic design decisions in *Dimensions*. But even with those caveats in place, it's still a *Final Fantasy* worth dipping your toes into.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LEGENDARY IMPROVEMENT: The original release of *Dimensions* – known as *Legends* – was a mobile affair. The iOS port features much-improved sprites and an overhauled UI, which works well on an iPad.

VERDICT 7/10
TURNS OUT IT'S FROM A VERY FAMILIAR DIMENSION

THE BEST THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT…

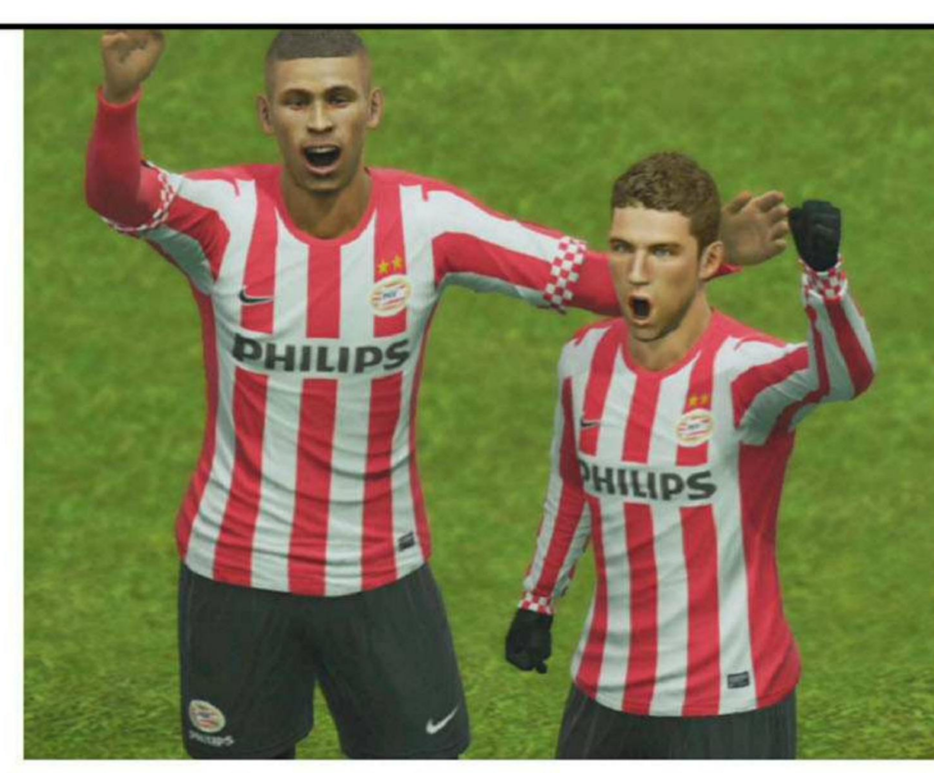
PES 2013

The measure of a multiplayer game can be found in the noises its players make. The greats over the years have all been marked by howls of delight or despair – *Mario Kart*, *Street Fighter*, *Call Of Duty* and *PES*. Or rather, not *PES*, but *FIFA*. *PES* once reigned as the king of football, but a slow and steady decline has seen it spend years suffering an identity crisis in the wilderness, falling between arcade and simulation. *PES*'s defences down, *FIFA* swooped in and took advantage of its licences, presentation and painful lessons learnt as it found its own winning formula.

You know that. The storyline of *PES* vs *FIFA* has been a long-running one, and the outcome in recent years has been as predictable as Barcelona vs Brighton. But now, at long last, *PES 2013* has recaptured its sparkle. Even better is that *PES* hasn't had to do anything dramatic to find its lost form but rather, like all good football teams, it's the result of some careful tinkering and tweaking, ensuring that Konami gets the most out of its parts.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS, PC, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: KCET
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Below: Hopeful shots from outside the area are viable options, particularly if you hit knuckleball shots, which strike the ball without spin. When they go in, it feels like you've hit the goal of the season, and it will have you drooling over the replay.



The most obvious example is how much faster *PES 2013* is. After the glacial pace of *PES 2012*, the speed has been cranked up for this outing, so the trademark fluidity of the series has slid back in. Lightning runs down the wing inspire fear once more, and defending has been beefed up to match as each player has a physical presence that's been missing in the last few versions. It sounds like a minor change, yet the end result is a real sense of anticipation when defenders move in to meet attackers, making the smaller battles as fascinating and engaging as bigger moments.

Konami has been massaging a new passing and shooting system into the series for the past few years, and it's now that the hard work has paid off. Manual passing and shooting is done by holding down the left trigger and pointing towards where you want the ball to go. It's awkward to use at first. Likewise, the new dynamic one-twos seem complicated initially and eventually become indispensable, as you use the right analogue stick to choose the direction the passing player runs in for the return ball. A long-standing argument against the series has been the level of scripting apparent in every facet of the game, yet with manual passing, manual shooting and dynamic one-twos, you now have the option to take control if you want it. The development team at Konami deserves credit for having what are effectively two control schemes here working at the same time. The

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TOTAL CONTROL: The manual options and dynamic one-twos give you a level of control that the series has never allowed before. It takes time to get used to, but you'll wonder how you went without it.

Right: The training mode can be as frustrating as it is helpful thanks to its awkward structure, yet it's essential for players who want to know about all the tricks and techniques that *PES 2013* has to offer.

PES 2013 IS THE RESULT OF SOME CAREFUL TINKERING AND TWEAKING, ENSURING THAT KONAMI GETS THE MOST OUT OF ITS PARTS

Below: The unpredictability of *PES* has always been its forte, and one area that *FIFA* hasn't really managed to capture is the sheer panic of a goalmouth scramble as the ball pings around the box.





FAQs

Q. LICENSED TEAMS?
Not as many as you hope may. Man United are there but Swansea and Norwich fans have to play as Swearcle and Northluck.

Q. WHAT LEAGUES ARE AVAILABLE?
The Premier League, Serie A, Ligue 1, Eredivisie, Bundesliga and La Liga are present, with big clubs such as Celtic, Anderlecht and Spartak Moscow under 'other'.

Q. ANY BONUS TEAMS?
The classic teams make a return, which is great for those who want matches between the best possible players in *PES 2013*.

BAG OF TRICKS

The button combinations get surprisingly complex as you become more and more familiar with *PES 2013*. Tapping the right trigger and a direction as a lofted pass comes in gives you the perfect way to trap the ball and set it up for a shot, while clicking in the right analogue stick just as you receive the ball lets you chest it up into the air to set up a volley attempt. The most complicated in terms of where your fingers are is doing a nutmeg. While holding the right trigger for close control, you have to tap RB and a direction to hit the ball through the defender's legs. Trickier than most moves in *PES 2013* but instant replay material if you get it right.



controls are as deep and complex as you're willing to take them.

In fact, visiting training shows that *PES 2013* has hidden enough special moves to rival a fighting game, let alone your average sports title. Deft touch dribbling, controlled shots, runarounds, nutmegs and so on are found via different button combinations. They're not essential to play, and they work rarely enough that these tricks are a cheeky flourish that only confident players will ever attempt. In any case, *PES 2013* still makes it a little easy for players like Cristiano Ronaldo and Leo Messi to bomb around the pitch, at least until players learn that holding A to press rather than commit to challenges is the key to slowing superstars down.

New players will have to work to figure all of this out for themselves. *PES 2013* doesn't make it easy for them – even the training mode has a frustrating complete-this-task-to-attempt-the-next-task sub-structure, which makes it feel like it's challenging you more than it's teaching. Yet the reward is worth it and there's a real feeling of depth underneath the shiny surface, of more moves to be found, of more tactics to be discovered and applied. Unlike *PES 2012*, the speed, the weight behind the shots and the unpredictability make the learning process here an enjoyable one rather than a chore.

It's a shame that Konami still hasn't found any obvious ways to solve the presentation problems found in Master League and Be A Legend modes. Both of them suffer from convoluted menus and a lack of guidance that mean you're often guessing at whether you're doing the right thing or not. Be A Legend is particularly bad for this, in light of the instant feedback you get from the equivalent mode in *FIFA 13* and even *NBA 2K13*, informing you of your progress as a match progresses. Working your way up from a nobody to a club legend is fun, but that's a sign of the strong gameplay powering *PES* this year rather than any drastic improvements on the presentation side.

How does *PES 2013* compare to *FIFA 13*? It's still very much an apples to oranges comparison, even with *PES* finally matching its long-term rival. *FIFA* excels in control, presentation and licences, while *PES 2013* has depth, unpredictability and speed. That this instalment should even cause the '*FIFA* or *PES*?' conversation to flare up again without an obvious winner is a big enough step forward for a series that has lost its way. But there's no doubt the real mark of victory for *PES 2013* is in those howled celebrations whenever a 35-yard volley is cracked into the back of the net, a sign that it has finally recaptured the multiplayer magic that defined its early PlayStation years.

VERDICT 8/10
IT'S FINALLY BACK ON FORM



The game's many boss battles will test your planning and reflexes.



WHAT ONCE WAS OLD IS NEW AGAIN?

New Little King's Story

To call this 'new' is somewhat disingenuous. While a great deal has changed in this Vita sequel to the cult Wii original – and not all of it for the better – it's more of a remake than a fresh adventure. The story and general game progression are almost identical, as are the RTS-lite mechanics of the gameplay.

Unfortunately, that game's charming presentation has been replaced by an art style that seems aimed at pulling in lovers of wide-eyed, large-breasted anime girls. The titular character has undergone a similarly jarring transformation, with a cocky and dashing teenage Corobo ousting the timid monarch we once knew.

Elsewhere, almost every female character boasts a massive bust and a disregard for respectable clothing. In short, the tone feels hopelessly wide of the mark, especially when you consider how adorable its predecessor was. The localisation presents its own problems, with a script packed with awkwardly constructed sentences and liberal helpings of misplaced modern-day slang.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: Marvelous Entertainment
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: DUNGEON HUNTER: ALLIANCE



WORSE THAN: LITTLE KING'S STORY

Once you've moved past these setbacks, you'll discover that *New Little King's Story* offers nothing new. According to the developer, the Vita was selected for its control setup, and while the arrangement works, it never feels as instinctive as the Wii Remote pointer did. Efforts are made to incorporate the touch panels, but they're only moderately successful and feel superfluous.

Visually, the graphics have been enhanced, but possibly not to the extent that you might expect given the impressive power of the host hardware. Despite the relatively humble nature of the presentation, *New Little King's Story* suffers from almost game-breaking slowdown, which is at its worst when you're striding through your heavily populated settlement with a full complement of guards in tow.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TOUCH ME: Using the PS Vita's rear touch panel, you can tap enemies to see more detailed information. It's not a massively vital feature, but it's one that can prove helpful in some circumstances.

Despite taking a step backwards when compared to the Wii original, the core elements that made the home console version so endearing remain in place. This is the RTS genre broken down to its base elements, and it's compulsively playable as a result. You marshal your forces, grow your settlement and build up your resources by exploring the rapidly expanding landscape. It's all perfectly enjoyable, but if you've already lived through the original there's very little here to encourage you to do it all over again. In fact, due to the game's myriad annoyances, reliving the diminutive monarch's tale on Vita could slightly tarnish your previously positive memories.



VERDICT 6/10

A FLAWED AND LARGELY REDUNDANT EXERCISE



WHY I ❤...

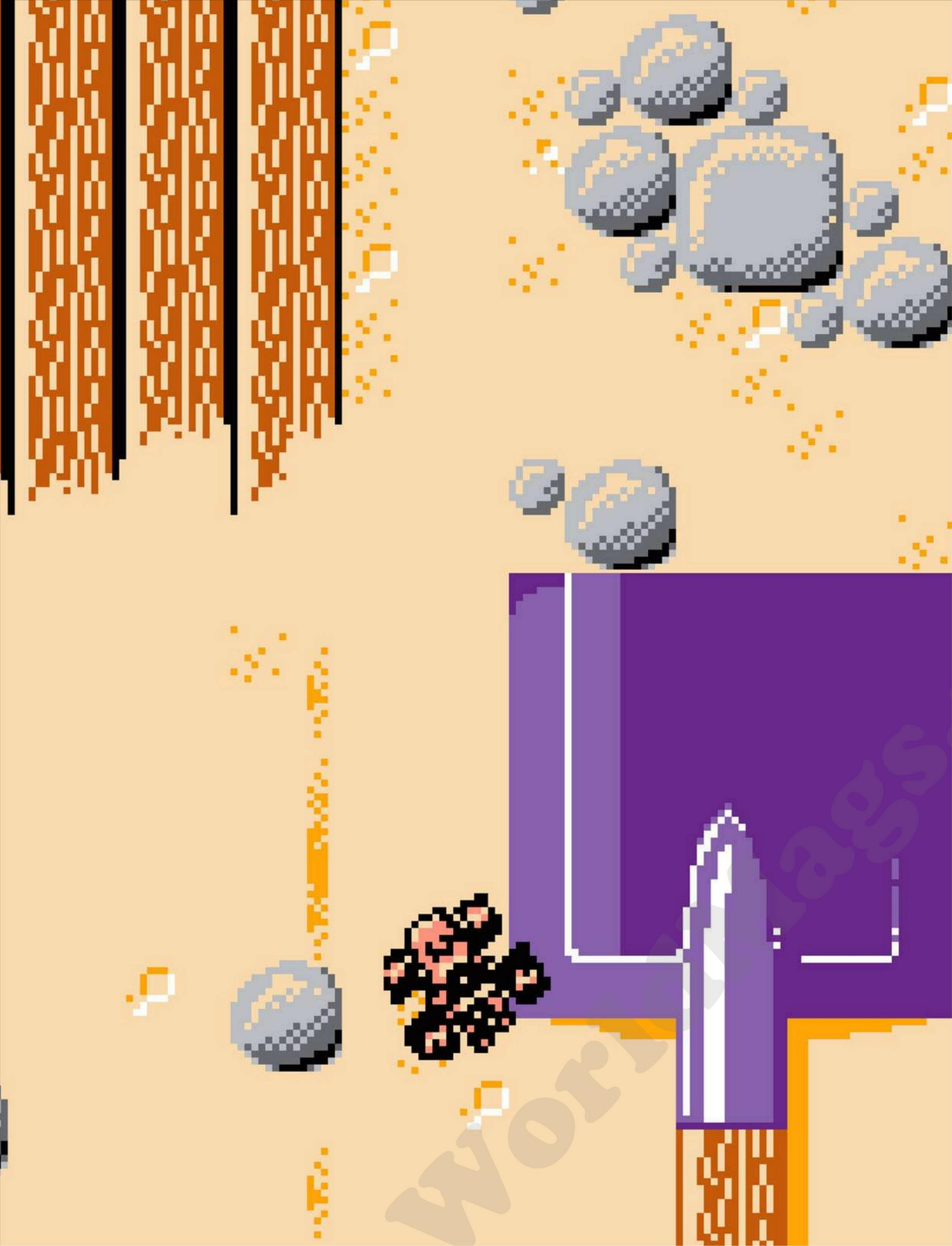
Micro Machines

DAVID DARLING, KWALEE

"*My favourite game of all time would be* Micro Machines. *We had a lot of fun while developing it, and it's one of those games that you can enjoy with lots of people in the same room. If you look on* Wikipedia *it's listed under party games in general, because it's a game that people enjoy playing together in groups. It's a very sociable game, and people have a lot of fun when playing it. You're constantly competing with your friends during races because of the way the camera would follow all the racers on the screen and reset them behind the group if you happen to die or fall off the track.*"

"If you look on Wikipedia it's listed under party games in general, because it's a game that people enjoy playing together in groups"

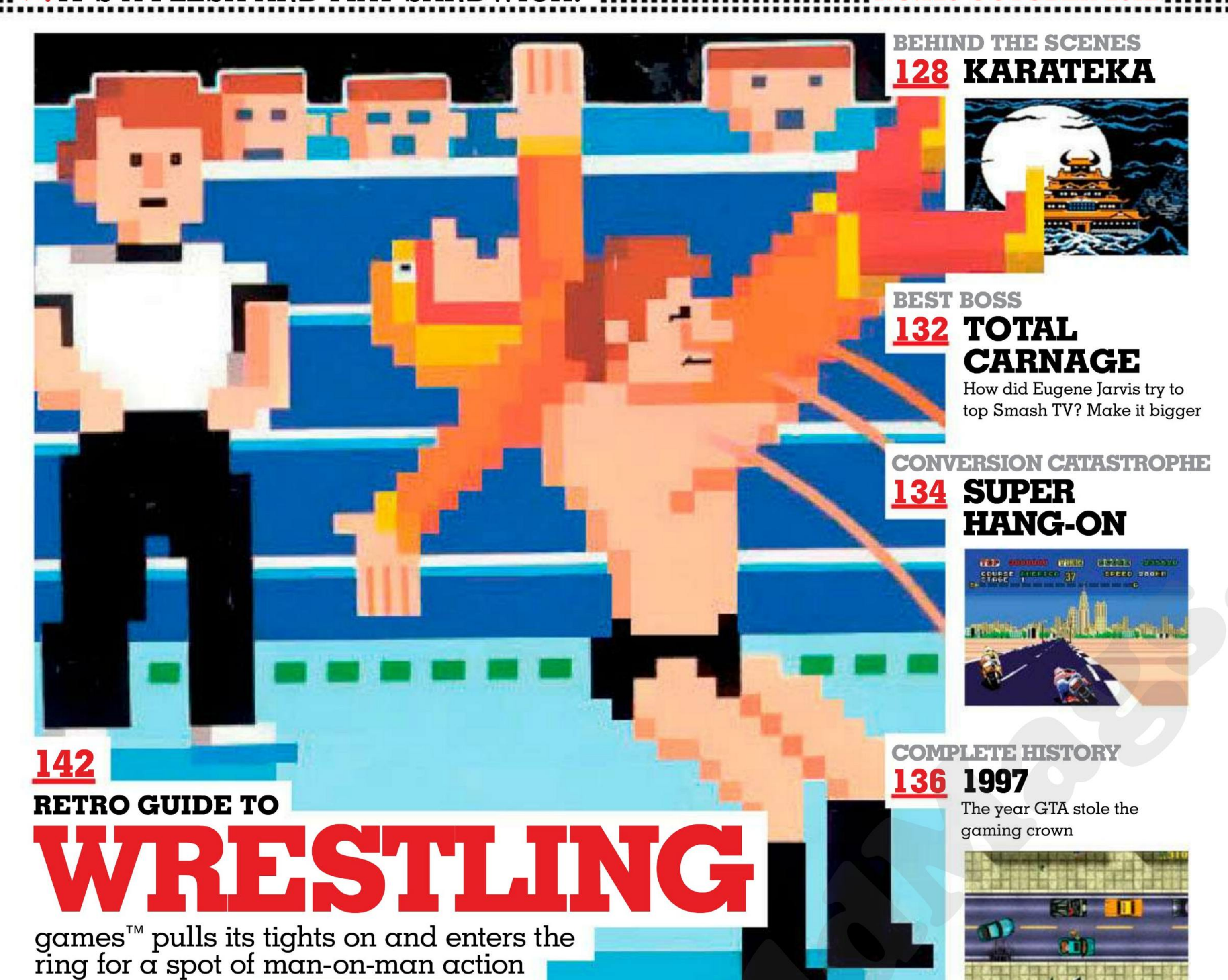
DAVID DARLING, KWALEE



RETRO

>.'IT'S A FLESH AND MAT SANDWICH!'

NO.128 OCTOBER 2012



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BEHIND THE SCENES

KARATEKA

With an HD remake due out later this year, Jordan Mechner's Karateka is thrust into the games™ spotlight. We speak to the Prince Of Persia creator to hear the origins of his very first game

Released: 1984
Format: Apple II
Publisher: Brøderbund Software
Developer: Jordan Mechner

KEY STAFF:
Jordan Mechner
Programmer and artist
Francis Mechner
Music
Gene Portwood
Additional graphics
Lauren Elliot
Additional graphics

"DEAR MR MECHNER," began the typed letter with the heading 'Greetings Earthling' in a futuristic computer font. It was addressed to Jordan Mechner in California, care of Brøderbund Software. "I am writing because I have played your game *Karateka*," it stated. "I am writing because you need to be congratulated on this game."

Gushing about the graphics, the shadows "and all", the writer enthused about the "tremendous job", which he believed "defined the state-of-the-art for future Apple games". The writer, John Romero, was so taken by the game and its stunning visual effects that he tried to guess the techniques Mechner used.

Romero was in awe of Mechner, and he admitted he drew great inspiration from *Karateka*. Two years later, aged 19, he started work at Origin Systems and two years after that Romero was having a major hand in producing games such as *Doom* and *Quake*. But we refer to that letter of 1985 for a reason: *Karateka* was a landmark game and a title that was so innovative that developers in their formative years wanted to learn from it. "Disciple of the Great Jordan and worshipper of the Magnificent Mechner," Romero signed off. He would not have been the only one to be so inspired.

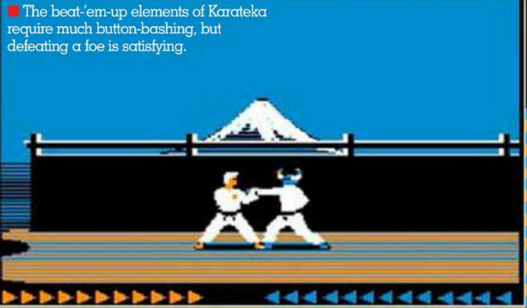
Mechner grew up with a love of animation. As a child, he would write stories, draw them and bring them to life on Super 8 film. He would have continued to do just that had he not become involved with an initiative run by IBM called Explorers, in which the computing giant would invite children to use its computer terminals after school. It was on these machines that he began to program in BASIC and APL.

By the time he was 14, his fascination had turned to obsession. His head was turned following weeks and months of playing on his friend's Apple II computer, realising he could make games that were similar to animated movies, helped along by the graphical prowess of the machine. He saved up and bought his own.

"I loved the Apple II computer," he says enthusiastically. "I really enjoyed programming on it. I took it to college with me and I spent most of my freshman year programming a game called *Deathbounce*. It was a shoot-'em-up, which I tried to get







The beat-'em-up elements of Karateka require much button-bashing, but defeating a foe is satisfying.

Brøderbund interested in taking on because I loved that publisher so much. They didn't want it and I was crushed."

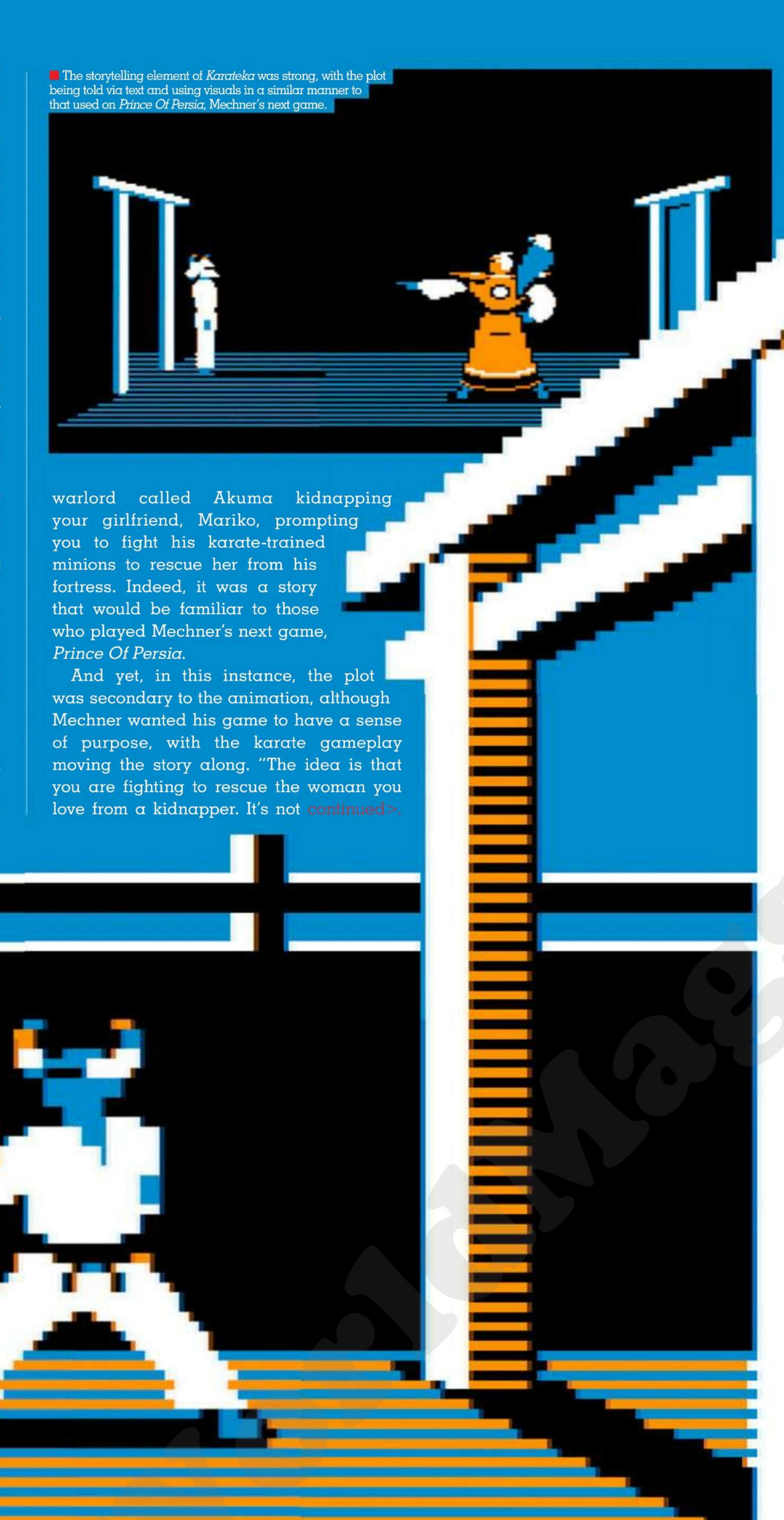
But far from becoming disillusioned and giving up, he was rather taken by a new Brøderbund game called *Choplifter*, which he says blew him away. "It had the smoothest, most sophisticated animation I'd ever seen on an Apple II," he says. And he vowed at that point to make a cinematic game. The seeds of *Karateka* – the name of which means a practitioner of karate – were sown.

From an early stage, Mechner wanted the new game to draw on the silent film techniques that he had learned about in his history of cinema classes. The visuals of the game were important to him and he wanted people to stop in their tracks and be amazed by the graphics and the animation. He drew on aspects of his life that interested him at the time.

"I took a lot of inspiration from sources other than games," he says. "My favourite Kurosawa film, *Seven Samurai*, was one, and I also liked the artist Hokusai and his Japanese woodblock prints. I was intrigued by the American film director DW Griffith, and early silent movies. I liked how they used cross-cutting to create suspense. I was also very much into Bruce Lee movies, Disney animation and the karate classes I was taking over the summer. All of that got thrown into the mix."

MECHNER SET HIS game in feudal Japan and the plot was simple and, with hindsight, rather typical and clichéd, telling of an evil warlord called Akuma kidnapping your girlfriend, Mariko, prompting you to fight his karate-trained minions to rescue her from his fortress. Indeed, it was a story that would be familiar to those who played Mechner's next game, *Prince Of Persia*.

And yet, in this instance, the plot was secondary to the animation, although Mechner wanted his game to have a sense of purpose, with the karate gameplay moving the story along. "The idea is that you are fighting to rescue the woman you love from a kidnapper. It's not continued >.



The storytelling element of *Karateka* was strong, with the plot being told via text and using visuals in a similar manner to that used on *Prince Of Persia*, Mechner's next game.



WHAT THEY SAID…



"The smoothness of the animation, complete with scrolling background and beautiful, full-coloured details, makes the game almost as enjoyable to watch as it is to play."

Compute magazine, Issue 65, October 1985





The lush graphics of *Karateka* were a major draw for many gamers.

fighting for the sake of it," he says.

It was Mechner's aim to produce lifelike characters in a fighting game that was more cinematic than any that had gone before it that caught most attention, however. The developer aimed to introduce tracking shots and cross-cutting, as well as a method of animation that had not been tried in gaming before called rotoscoping, in which filmed footage is traced over frame by frame and turned into realistic animation.

Whereas the original idea had been to draw the frames by hand, he decided it looked too much like programmer animation. "It was not nearly good enough for what I was dreaming of," he admits. "A huge leap forward came when I decided to try rotoscoping, and the game was starting to evolve quite a lot from its original conception."

The player had to control their own karateka in a battle against the enemy. Kicking and punching through the fighting fodder, it was possible to determine the height of the blows. Mechner wanted those characters to look as if they were real, with every punch and kick played out as it would in his classes. This, he believed, would be more true to his love of animation.

"I had a great book by two early Disney animators and I knew they'd used rotoscoping as an animation aid," he says. "I used Super 8 film to shoot my mom's karate teacher doing punches and kicks, then traced the outlines into the computer. Despite the primitive technology, it worked fantastically well. Later, I used a more refined version of the rotoscope in my next game, *Prince Of Persia*, and then again in *The Last Express*."

As well as the rotoscoping, he was keen to infuse *Karateka* with as much Japanese influence as possible. 'Akuma' means 'devil', and the Akuma Castle is inspired by the Himeji Castle near Kyoto, Japan. This was one of the very first martial arts games – coming three years before *Street Fighter* and beating *Kung Fu Master* and *Karate Champ* by a few months – and Mechner was ensuring it was nothing if not faithful.

A FIGHTING GAME THAT WAS MORE CINEMATIC THAN ANY THAT WENT BEFORE

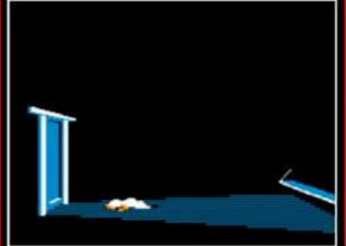
Since the joysticks of the time had few buttons, the moves of *Karateka* were not complex in the slightest, but it fitted his desire of being a pick-up-and-play kind of game. But despite trying to keep things relatively simple, it was still a major challenge for Mechner. He had to produce everything from scratch on his Apple II, programming in machine code. Drawing items on screen was initially a laborious process in which he had to code the tools to allow him to create freely, and it took him many months.

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Choplifter > Kareteka > Prince Of Persia



This 1982 arcade game showed Mechner that games could tell stories, and the graphics inspired him.



The success of *Karateka* and its rotoscoping technique ensured Mechner would "have another go". This was the result.



Mechner's main difficulty was keeping his motivation high. He was 18, at college, and he had to balance work with play as well as the game. "It was the biggest project of any kind I'd taken on in my whole life," he says. "It kept on growing as I added new ideas and made it more ambitious. The challenge was to keep coming back to it. To not stop. But I was in college so obviously there were interruptions."


JORDAN MECHNER
Programmer

The difficult part was that he produced the game largely on his own, with friends Gene Portwood and Lauren Elliot helping with additional graphics and animation. His Austrian-born father, who became an accomplished classical concert pianist by the age of 19 and works as a research psychologist, composed the music, and Mechner spent ages working out how to take that score and translate it from reams of handwritten sheet music into assembly machine code.

But, after two and a half years, it was ready. Six months earlier, in 1985, he had sent it on a 5.25-inch floppy disk to Brøderbund and Electronic Arts. He was determined the game would not fail as his previous one had, so he ensured they only saw it when it was pretty much done.

"Brøderbund called back immediately and said they wanted to publish it," he recalls. "They flew me out to California for the summer to make changes, which was primarily expanding the game, adding stuff. That summer was my introduction to working at a professional game studio. It was a huge thrill, meeting my heroes – people like Dan Gorlin, who'd made *Choplifter* – and being accepted as a colleague, not just a kid who'd been fiddling with a computer. It was what I'd been dreaming of since age 14."

THE GAME WAS released in 1984, with a NES port coming in the same year. It was later ported to a host of other systems, from the Amstrad CPC and Atari 800 to the Commodore 64 and DOS two years later "The PC version seemed okay, except for overall sluggishness, frequent disk accesses, and a few minor graphics glitches. Then I booted up the Apple version to compare and it was so smooth it made me want to cry," Mechner recalls. Nevertheless, the success of the game was such that in April 1985, it was ranked as the bestselling game in America by *Billboard* magazine. In 1988, an Atari ST version was released, and in Spain in 1990, it was ported to the ZX Spectrum. More than 500,000 units were sold, including 250,000 units in its first month of release in Japan.

Mechner left Yale with a BA in psychology and decided to pursue programming. "It was a miracle I ever graduated," he says. But with *Prince Of Persia* and *The Last Express* to come, the gaming world was glad he stuck with it.

The storytelling element of *Karateka* was strong, with the plot being told via text and using visuals in a similar manner to that used on *Prince Of Persia*, Mechner's next game.



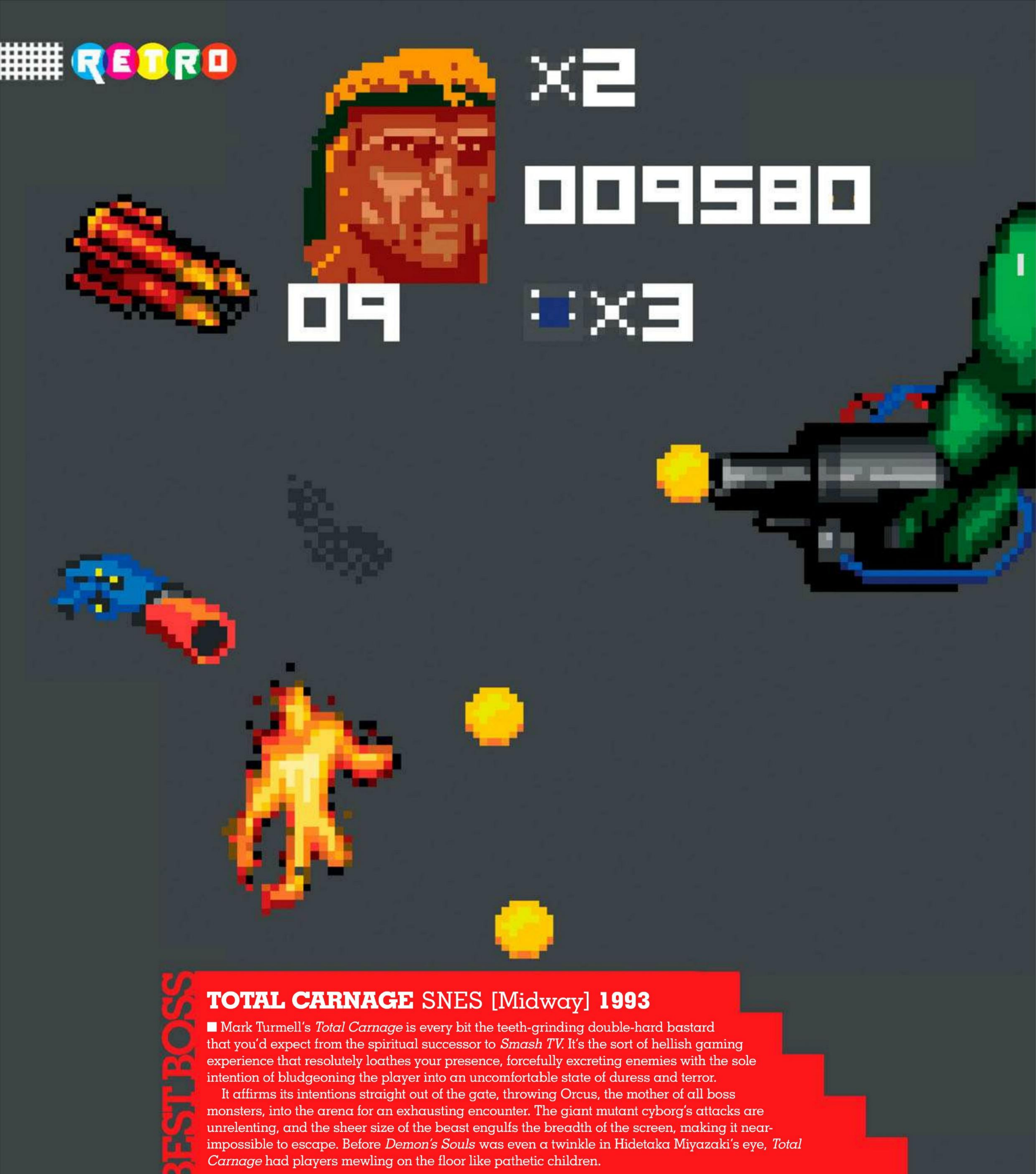
The price of programming

KARATEKA CONVINCED Jordan Mechner that there was money to be made from programming, and in his journals, written while he was at Yale University, he talks of his delight when the money began to roll in.

He received his first royalty cheque in May 1985 for the princely sum of $2,117. Mechner received a 15 per cent royalty on the sale of the game and the cheque meant his advance – which he doesn't reveal – had been paid off. At the same time, he tells of how his father called to let him know the game was *Billboard*'s top-ranked program for the week. Even then, he doubted that programming would be a viable career. "That's step two in my convincing myself of this," he writes. "Step three will be when I see it for myself." When he finally sees it for himself, he delights: "Me and Madonna. Yow."

He continued to wrestle between creating games and screenwriting. "In the time it'll take me to do a new game, I could write three screenplays," he observes. He appears disappointed that *Karateka* "may make me as little as $75,000 all told and it's at the top of the charts. There's no guarantee the new game will be as successful." He even doubts the viability of the future computer games market.

Talks with Brøderbund, however, sparked his excitement again, and he signed a deal for *Prince Of Persia*, something he then confesses kept him awake with anxiety. "How did I do it for *Karateka*?" he asks. "I can't remember. I'm not sure I can do it again."

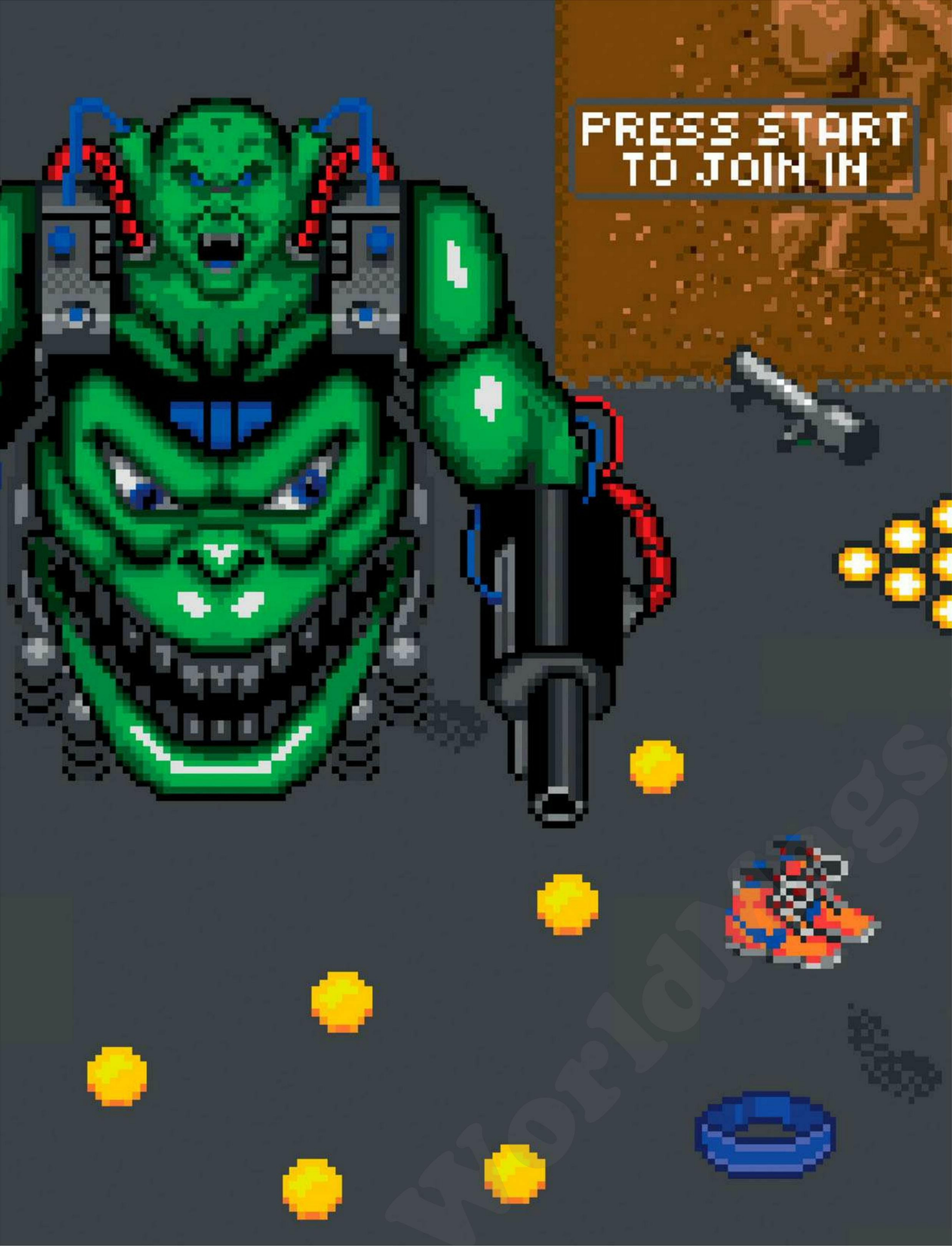


BEST BOSS

TOTAL CARNAGE SNES [Midway] **1993**

■ Mark Turmell's *Total Carnage* is every bit the teeth-grinding double-hard bastard that you'd expect from the spiritual successor to *Smash TV*. It's the sort of hellish gaming experience that resolutely loathes your presence, forcefully excreting enemies with the sole intention of bludgeoning the player into an uncomfortable state of duress and terror.

It affirms its intentions straight out of the gate, throwing Orcus, the mother of all boss monsters, into the arena for an exhausting encounter. The giant mutant cyborg's attacks are unrelenting, and the sheer size of the beast engulfs the breadth of the screen, making it near-impossible to escape. Before *Demon's Souls* was even a twinkle in Hidetaka Miyazaki's eye, *Total Carnage* had players mewling on the floor like pathetic children.


PRESS START
TO JOIN IN

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: C64
Year: 1987
Publisher: Electric Dreams
Developer: Monarch Development

SUPER HANG-ON

ORIGINAL RELEASE **Board:** Sega OutRun hardware **Year:** 1987 **Publisher:** Sega **Developer:** In-house

LEADING SEGA'S sprite-scaling assault on amusement arcades, *Hang-On* was a significant release for the publisher, one that not only showcased its talent for creating exhilarating racing games but also the thrilling results of merging videogames with simulators.

Ushering in an era of extravagant arcade machine design, *Hang-On* had everything to attract arcade goers in their droves. Sega's new-fangled super-scaling graphics technique created visuals that were detailed and attention-grabbing, and also gave an impressive sensation of speed. And this iconic visual tech was enhanced further by an imposing 'ride-on' arcade cabinet, which took the appearance of a replica red motorcycle and featured realistic controls. The upright model was operated using a handlebar with a throttle and brake lever, while the aforementioned ride-on edition required users to shift their weight around to bank and steer the bike.

So successful was *Hang-On* that Sega released an update/sequel two years later. *Super Hang-On* added undulating tracks, more courses and a 'turbo' button that could only be activated once players had hit maximum speed.

Though the original only received a small number of conversions, including to the Master System and MSX, *Super Hang-On* was ported to everything from the Spectrum to the GBA. While most conversions are average to decent, the worst by a country mile is the disastrous Commodore 64 port.

Once the racing starts, alarm bells ring instantly. Graphically, the game looks messy and unfinished. The bike sprites look like mangled dog toys, and as they come towards you they seem to sporadically shift size – and not in the good, realistic way. The single track in the game – you only get the Africa course in this port – is equally ugly, and the fragile engine's inability to cope with the undulation effect of the track causes floating trees and road markings.

The landscape graphics don't stretch the full width of the screen either, and the scrolling and speed is also a big issue – so much so that the turbo button feels about as useful as wings on a submarine. The loading screen and music are probably the best thing about it, even though the music isn't faithful to the coin-op and gets partially ruined by some horrible sound effects anyway.

Overall, this is a shocking port, and is certainly up there with the worst arcade racers on the C64.

HEAD TO HEAD

ARCADE



C64



THE BREAKDOWN

1 The graphics are atrocious, and the C64 is capable of so much more. Instead of racing in an exhilarating, continent-spanning bike race, in this port it looks like you're driving through a desolate atomic wasteland with a small, ugly child riding pillion.

2 The speed really cripples this port. The shoddy graphics could almost be forgiven if the game was nippy, smooth and thrilling to play, but it runs like a beat-up old Kawasaki Ninja.

3 *Super Hang-On* introduced a turbo button and undulating tracks; this conversion features both things but doesn't do a great job at either. The undulating track effects in particular are laughable, causing the road markings and scenery to fidget and hang in the air.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **Mega Drive** Year: **1989** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **In-house**



The best and most faithful conversion of *Super Hang-On* is the impressive Sharp X6800 port. However, as that was only released in Japan, we are recommending Sega's own Mega Drive conversion as the one to play instead. It looks and sounds the part, and it also features a career mode.

THE COMPLETE HI

YEAR IN 19

THE BEGINNING of 1997 saw Sony and Sega firmly entrenched in the 32-bit war, which had already claimed Atari's Jaguar and the ambitious 3DO.

It was a fierce war, but as we revealed last month, the sheer number of quality games on Sony's console saw it slowly pull away from the more arcade-based Saturn. Sony had the popular *Grand Theft Auto*; Sega had nothing similar to entice gamers. Sega did have some excellent RPGs, including *Shining Force III* and *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, which would be released in 1998, but neither could compete with the sales juggernaut that was *Final Fantasy VII*. Even the arcade quality of *Sega Rally* couldn't stand up to the car porn that was *Gran Turismo*.

Sega's console certainly excelled in some areas. It saw several great FPSs in 1997, including *Quake* and *Duke Nukem 3D*, and it hosted an impressive selection of shooters and fighting games, but by this point they had little to no mass appeal with the average gamer, something the PlayStation didn't have a problem with.

Sega was losing the battle, and it wasn't helped by the discontinuation of the Mega Drive and Game Gear, which were finally put to rest so Sega could concentrate fully on competing in the 32-bit war. 1997 was also the year that Nintendo's fight against its publishing peers went worldwide, thanks to the European release of the Nintendo 64.

Although titles like *GoldenEye*, *Star Fox 64* and *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* showed off the potential of Nintendo's console, it was still suffering due to poor third-party support. As a result, most Nintendo fans had to rely on Rare and Nintendo to supply the machine's killer apps. Fortunately, both were more than capable of churning out the hits, and the aforementioned *GoldenEye* and *Star Fox 64* were joined by *Diddy Kong Racing*, *Blast Corps* and the greatly underrated *Yoshi's Story*.

1997 was also the year that Nintendo launched a smaller, cuter SNES and came under fire for its popular *Pokémon* series. An episode called 'Denno Senshi Porygon' was removed from circulation after Japanese children started suffering seizures triggered by a sequence involving strobing colours. Nintendo not only put a self-imposed ban on the episode in question, but also barred the offending Pokémon, Porygon, from future episodes of the TV series, which has continued up to the present day. One less for Ash to collect, then…

While the available home consoles continued to battle, the PC developers of the time were flexing the 3D muscles that had started to emerge in recent years. The most exciting development at the time

■ Games like *Dungeon Keeper* proved that innovation was still alive and well in the games industry. It was another smash hit from Bullfrog.

■ *Final Fantasy VII* and *Tactics* in one year? After waiting three years since *Final Fantasy VI*, fans couldn't believe their luck… unless they'd stuck with Nintendo.

■ *Duke Nukem Forever* was first announced in 1997. The game proved to be appropriately named, eventually getting released 14 years later.

STORY OF GAMES

was 3D Realms' announcement that it was working on a brand new sequel to the popular *Duke Nukem 3D*. The game ended up having one of the most lengthy and difficult developments of all time, though, eventually limping out courtesy of Gearbox Software in 2011. Needless to say, it failed to live up to the 14 years of hype that had preceded it.

Fortunately, there were plenty of great PC games that did come out in 1997, and they showed a breadth and diversity that proved to be tremendously exciting for those prepared to shell out on expensive graphics cards.

Dungeon Keeper was an innovative strategy title from Bullfrog that had you protecting a dungeon of monsters from invading do-gooders; *The Last Express* was an exciting art nouveau adventure from Jordan Mechner, which took place in near real-time; and *X-Wing vs TIE Fighter* was the first proper multiplayer game set in the popular *X-Wing* series of *Star Wars* games. Richard Garriott's *Ultima Online* was an early MMORPG, largely responsible for the popularity of the genre today, while *Total Annihilation*, *Fallout* and *Quake II* all set new standards within their respective genres. PC gaming – not for the first time, and certainly not for the last – was showing that it wasn't just home consoles that could deliver stunning visuals and exciting new gameplay mechanics.

REVIEW 97

And yet, for all the success of 1997, a large cloud would settle over the year due to the unfortunate death of one of gaming's most famous innovators. Gunpei Yokoi had been born in 1941 and became one of Nintendo's most prominent game designers. First starting at the company in 1965, he was originally in charge of one of Nintendo's assembly-line machines.

He was soon making all manner of quirky toys for the company, and eventually moved into videogames. He came up with the idea of the Game & Watch range, designed ROB and also produced several important franchises, including *Donkey Kong*, *Metroid* and *Kid Icarus*.

His biggest success, however, was Nintendo's massively popular Game Boy, which eventually led to Yokoi working on the Virtual Boy. When the new console failed to become a success, Yokoi left Nintendo with several of his staff to form Koto. He enjoyed some success with the Bandai-developed WonderSwan, but was tragically killed on 4 October. After being involved in a car accident, Yokoi got out of his vehicle to inspect the damage and was struck down by two passing cars, being pronounced dead just two hours later. One of gaming's brightest stars had been extinguished.



Stainless Games' *Carmageddon* caused plenty of controversy when it was released in the same year as *GTA*. A sequel is currently being made on iOS.



PaRappa The Rapper was a quirky PlayStation game from designer Masaya Matsuura, which pretty much popularised the entire rhythm-action genre.



Nine months after its Japanese debut, Nintendo's N64 finally reached European shores. It was ably supported in its first year by some strong titles from Nintendo and Rare.

The Last Express was an innovative PC game from Jordan Mechner, which featured distinctive visuals and real-time gameplay.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Martin Hollis

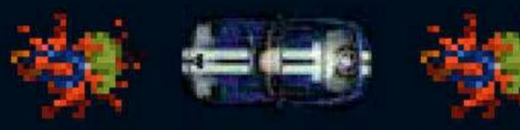
Martin Hollis is best known for his work at Rare where he was head of software for a number of years. He first cut his teeth on the arcade and N64 versions of Rare's combo-based fighter, *Killer Instinct*, but it's *GoldenEye 007* and its spiritual successor, *Perfect Dark*, that he'll always be remembered for. Hollis was director of both games, but eventually left Rare to work on the GameCube for Nintendo of America. He departed Nintendo in 2000 to set up Zoonami, which is now known as Vohm. It has released three games: *Zendoku*, *Go! Puzzle* and *Bonsai Barber*.













EXTENDED PLAY: **1997**

GRAND THEFT AUTO

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review…. This month, DMA Design's controversial game becomes a world-beater

CONTROVERSY HAS FOLLOWED recent *Grand Theft Auto* games like a dog following its tail. It was no different in 1997, when the original was unleashed to a storm of critical praise and public (read: *Daily Mail*) backlash.

It was easy to see why it was so controversial. After all, this was a game that allowed you to mow down innocent civilians with a variety of weapons, steal cars whenever you fancied, and take part in all sorts of shady deals, then gun down the police when the boys in blue were finally attracted to all the carnage you were creating.

And yet that was only part of *Grand Theft Auto*'s huge appeal. DMA Design – behind *Lemmings*, *Walker* and *Hired Guns* – realised it was freedom that most players craved, and it set out to create one of the earliest virtual sandboxes to appear in a videogame. Missions could be followed with strict precision, or simply ignored; adventurous players would go on bloody rampages and then try to evade the escalating police force that followed them, while others still were simply content to explore the huge city that DMA had created.

And DMA really had created something that somehow felt alive. Yes, the vehicles and inhabitants lacked the intelligence of those found in *GTA*'s more immersive sequels, but it was hard not to marvel as you scoured the city on the lookout for mischief and watched a digital world unfold in front of your eyes.

IT WAS HARD NOT TO MARVEL AS A WORLD UNFOLDED IN FRONT OF YOUR EYES

The top-down view itself was exceedingly clever, acting as a subtle buffer from all the carnage. Even if you were mercilessly gunning down Hare Krishnas, running over pedestrians in sports cars, and shooting innocent passers-by for no other reason than because you could, the pastel colour scheme and tiny sprites made it feel more like an arcade game than the realistic sequels that would eventually appear once the franchise made the jump to 3D.

GTA's arcade-like nature was further amplified by the clever scoring system that rewarded you for completing multiple missions and breaking the law, so mowing down pedestrians while in a police car would score you double the usual points. Earn enough and you'd be promoted to the next level of infamy.

Grand Theft Auto proved that complete freedom could be just as important as a structured videogame, and cemented DMA's reputation as a team of innovative designers. Its sequels may have surpassed it, but its importance and influence keeps it in a class of its own.



Carjacking was a key mechanic of the game. Even moving vehicles weren't safe from your nefarious criminal.



Missions could be completed in a variety of ways. Nicking motorcycles is much easier if you run the gang over first.

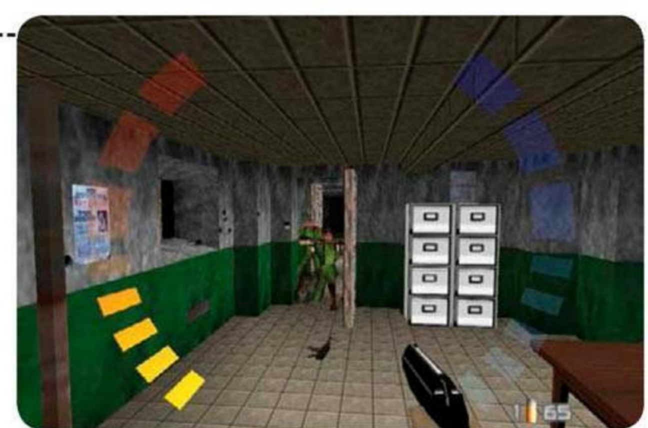
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

■ *GRAND THEFT AUTO* quickly received a follow-up in 1999, along with an expansion pack where the action was set in London – the only *GTA* to take place in a real city instead of a parody – during the Sixties. It wasn't until the franchise branched into the third dimension with the 2001 release of *Grand Theft Auto III* that the clones and imitators came out in force. *The Getaway*, *The Simpsons: Hit & Run*, *Crackdown*, *True Crime*, *Saints Row*, *Mercenaries* and, most recently, *Sleeping Dogs* all owe their success to *GTA*, while Rockstar itself has continued to refine it, delivering numerous spin-offs and standalone games, including the excellent *GTA: Vice City* and *Chinatown Wars* for the DS and numerous other handhelds. Oh, and let's not forget the upcoming release of *GTA V*, which continues to draw intense scrutiny whenever new screenshots are released. Rockstar's juggernaut certainly shows no sign of slowing down.



ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR…

GOLDENEYE 007



■ RARE'S STUNNING first-person shooter was a revelation. Cleverly structured missions, excellent visuals and a tiered difficulty level all combined to create the best first-person shooter on any console. Then, of course, there was the stunning multiplayer, which further cemented Rare as the best developer on the N64 short of Nintendo itself.

FINAL FANTASY VII



■ SQUARE'S DECISION to leave Nintendo's cartridge-based hardware for its seventh *Final Fantasy* game proved a wise one. Stunning cinematics, dazzling locations and a gripping story turned it into one of the franchise's most successful games, introducing millions to RPGs and making its remake one of the most-wanted games.

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT



■ AMBITIOUS WAS one way to describe Konami's new spin on its vampire-whipping series. Magnificent was another. Bravely sticking to beautiful 2D sprite work when the world was obsessed with 3D, *Symphony Of The Night* created an exciting, open template for *Castlevania* that the franchise would stick to in the following years.

LYLAT WARS



■ THE SNES missed out on *Star Fox*'s true sequel as Nintendo shifted focus to the next generation, but lucky N64 owners received this excellent follow-up. Takao Shimizu's game did a better job of aping the *Star Wars* universe than LucasArts did, delivering an epic space opera that was filled with exciting thrills and sublime shooting.

DUNGEON KEEPER



■ BULLFROG'S INNOVATIVE PC game put a clever twist on its previous resource-management games. Placing you firmly in the role of the bad guy, you had to make your dungeon as attractive as possible in order to attract powerful monsters, who would defend your lair against intrepid adventurers. A timeless classic.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: CD32
YEAR: 1994
MANUFACTURER: Paravision/Microbotics
EXPECT TO PAY: £200+

AMIGA CD32 SX-1 EXPANSION

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

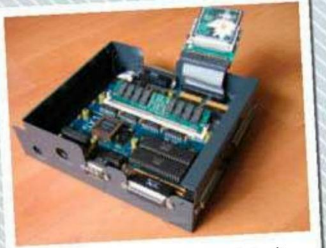


EXHIBIT A: The SX-1 certainly isn't the prettiest creation. As this picture shows, no effort was spent to make its design look in keeping with that of the CD32.



EXHIBIT B: The card expands the CD32 greatly. It makes it not only backwards compatible with pretty much the full Amiga game library, but also gives it the functionality of a full A1200 computer.



EXHIBIT C: An improved expansion card was released by DCE Computer Service. It did the same thing as the SX-1 but fitted more snugly and came with an optional 68030 CPU processor to make it compatible with more advanced A1200 games.

WHY IT'S RARE

THE CD32 was without doubt Commodore's most successful attempt at breaking into the console market. Before the system's release in 1993, the company already had two unsuccessful computer/console hybrids under its belt: the Commodore 64GS (Game System), which was basically a cartridge-based console version of the C64; and the CDTV, an expensive CD-ROM-based set-top box powered by Amiga 500 hardware. Continuing this pattern, the CD32 was heavily based around the architecture of the Amiga 1200, sharing the same chipset. However, the CD32 could go one better than its failed console predecessors… with a bit of help.

The SX-1 was a third-party expansion card that could be inserted into the back of the console to allow connection of a floppy disk drive, printer, a hard drive, and even a keyboard. Effectively turning the CD32 into a full A1200 computer, it expanded the functionality and software library of the console considerably, enabling it to play games designed for the A500, A1200, CDTV and CD32. The card transformed the CD32 into the ultimate, all-encompassing piece of Amiga gaming kit. And it is for this reason that the SX-1 expansion card has become so sought-after with Amiga enthusiasts in recent years.



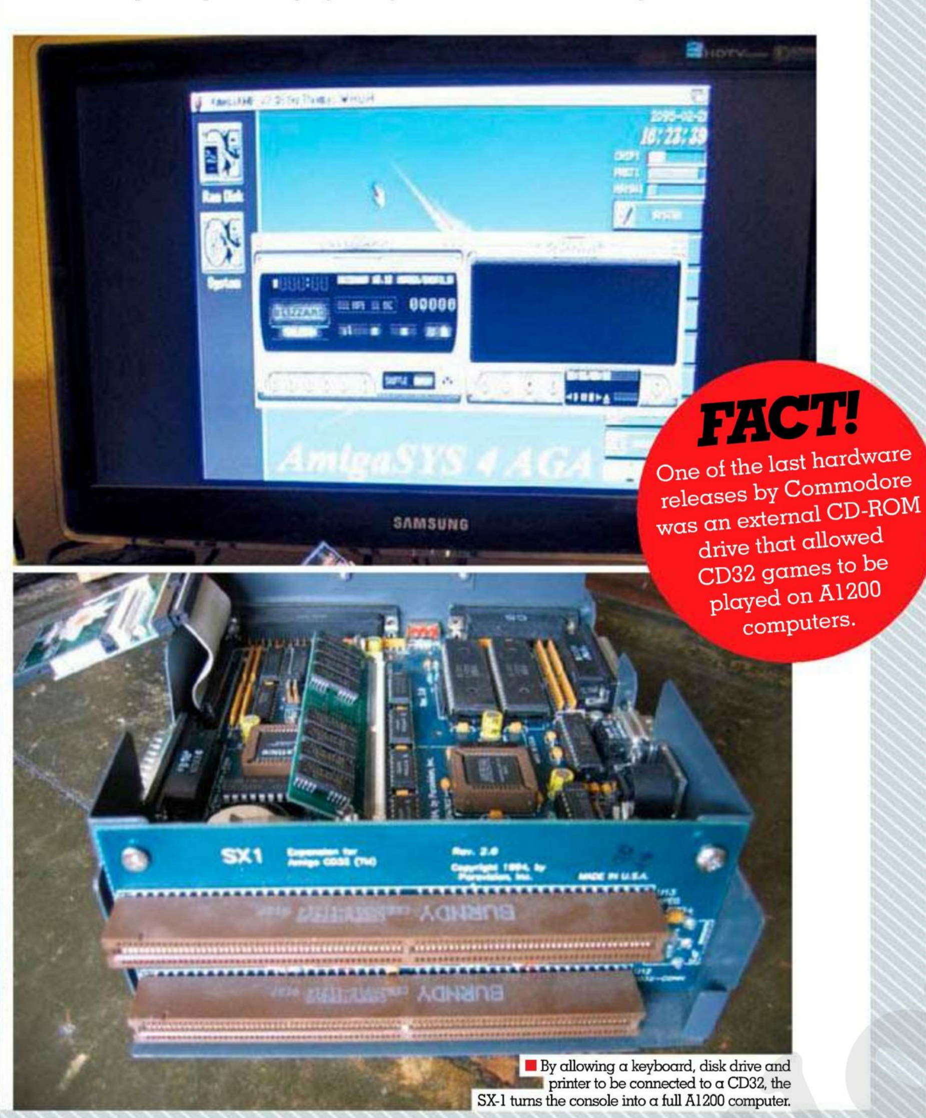
The SX-1 might not be the most attractive looking add-on, but it expands the functions of the CD32 considerably.



Worth Owning?

IF YOU already own an A1200 and a CD32, there is probably little point in forking out for an SX-1 card. Amiga 500 games can be played on the A1200, and without the use of any costly expansion card it is possible to copy your Amiga floppy disk games onto a CD and get them to play on a standard unexpanded CD32 console by installing a boot sequence.

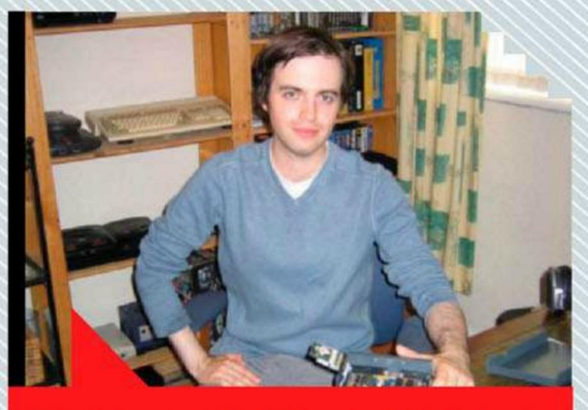
If you don't already own an Amiga computer, or consider yourself to be a serious Commodore collector, the CD32 and SX-1 expansion card becomes an interesting prospect, especially for Amiga gaming fans. Though much of the CD32 software library was made up of Amiga 500 ports that only really benefited from enhanced CD soundtracks and new cinemas, there were still some great exclusives and enhanced updates released during the final years of the console's relatively short lifespan, including *Simon The Sorcerer*, *Alien Breed: Tower Assault* and *Ultimate Body Blows*. As the SX-1 card transforms the console into a fully fledged A1200 computer, capable of playing pretty much every game in the Amiga library, it forms one half of the definitive hardware combo for serious Amiga collectors.



By allowing a keyboard, disk drive and printer to be connected to a CD32, the SX-1 turns the console into a full A1200 computer.

FACT!

One of the last hardware releases by Commodore was an external CD-ROM drive that allowed CD32 games to be played on A1200 computers.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Dave Webster**
Occupation: **Software engineer**

What is it about the CD32, and SX-1 in particular, that is attractive to you?
I like the novelty of it. The unit lets you convert the games console into a fully working Amiga computer on par with the A1200, with a keyboard, monitor, floppy, HDD, serial port, a clock and extra RAM. The only other consoles in recent memory that came near to achieving this are the PS3 and, to a lesser extent, Sega's Dreamcast. The CD32 itself had a handful of great games developed specifically to take advantage of both the AGA chipset and the CD, like *Liberation* and *Simon The Sorcerer*.

How and where did you find your SX-1?
I picked up the SX-1 together with a CD32 console, including keyboard and floppy drive, in a tiny shop in Scarborough's Market Vaults back in 2001. If I remember correctly, the whole lot cost about £100. There was a guy who used to sell a lot of second-hand computing gear, although he seemed to specialise mainly in Amiga and Sega Saturn items. Sadly, the shop closed down a few years back.

What condition was the card in and how much did you pay for it?
The unit was unboxed in good condition and came with a manual. It was just as you see it now apart from the Compact Flash adaptor, which I swiped from my A1200.

Do you actually use it and, if so, what do you think of it?
At the time, extensively. Back in the early Nineties I was an Atari ST owner and my experience of Amigas was always through friends' machines. Having a physical Amiga of my own rather than an emulator was a nice exploration exercise, which prompted me to later spend the cash on an A1200 and a 68030 accelerator.

Finally, would you ever consider selling it or is it yours for life?
Not for money, no. I think that when I part with it, I will give it away to a good home.

THE RETRO GUIDE TO… WRESTLING

With WWE '13 gathering up players for another round of suplexes and submission holds, games™ steps into the virtual squared circle and looks back at the rich history of the wrestling genre

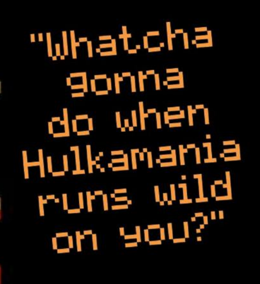
IN MANY WAYS, wrestling and videogames go hand in hand. You've got the pomp, pageantry and high production values. You've got the casts of endearing and offbeat characters, and the sometimes remarkable, sometimes half-baked storylines. You've got the action bits, the comedy bits, the dramatic bits, and the bits that often make no sense at all. But most of all, you've got two forms of entertainment that people all over the world have enjoyed for decades

It makes sense, then, that wrestling games have been a staple of the medium for almost as long as *Pac-Man*, *Donkey Kong* and *Mario*. Yes, it's been almost 30 years since Technos Japan released the awkward *The Big Pro Wrestling!* in arcades over the world, kickstarting a genre that millions of fans still play today.

And while the virtual wrestling landscape is – like its real-life counterpart – now dominated by the juggernaut that is Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment, retro wrestling games were a varied bunch, some of them legends, some of them mid-carders, and some of them broken Spanish announce tables.

So, let's take a look back and chart videogame wrestling's journey from independent jobber to pay-per-view headliner. Due to the sheer breadth of wrestling games released over the past three decades, the following guide does not contain dedicated sections for each and every retro entry in the genre. However, we will touch on the large majority of them, with a particular focus on the monuments that need to be recognised for all they brought to the ring.

The games will be coming fast and furious, kind of like a hurricanrana, so strap on your tights and get yourself ready. Here comes the pain.



1983: THE BIG PRO WRESTLING!



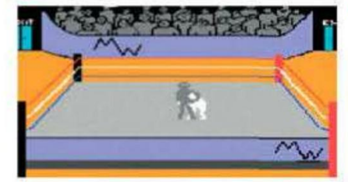
THAT'S RIGHT: the first wrestling game had nothing to do with WWF, WCW or any other known wrestling promotion at the time. Technos Japan's arcade title let players grapple in and out of the ring with a menu-based move system, pitting the Ricky Fighters against the Strong Bads, who later inspired the popular *Homestar Runner* cartoon character, in either solo or tag team action. In 1985, it made it to North America as *Tag Team Pro Wrestling* for the NES. While it was certainly a pioneer of its time, it was pretty rough to control. Thankfully, Technos would quickly improve its efforts, releasing the infinitely better *Mat Mania: The Prowrestling Network* in 1985, and its quality follow-up *Mania Challenge* a year later.

1984: APPOOOH

SEGA ENTERED the arcade wrestling game with this Japan-only release, and for the most part *Appoooh* played as its name would suggest. It is notable, though, in that it featured thinly veiled knock-offs of actual wrestlers. Hulk Hogan was 'H Hogen', Andre the Giant was 'A Giants', and so on.



1984: MASTER WRESTLING



THE FIRST wrestling game to be playable at home was the little-known *Mike Gibson's Master Wrestling* for the Commodore 64. It too was mostly subpar, sporting ugly, blob-like wrestlers and some weak animations. The C64 would get better wrestlers like Beam's *Rock 'N Wrestle* and Codemasters' *Wrestling Superstars* as the years passed, but the home computer was hardly a haven for anyone in need of a good slobberknocker.

1985: M.U.S.C.L.E.



RELEASED IN Japan as *Kinnikuman Muscle Tag Match*, Bandai's *M.U.S.C.L.E.* for the NES was the world's first wrestling game to feature officially licensed characters. Unfortunately for wrestling fans, those characters came from popular superhero manga *Kinnikuman*. Even by NES standards, this game looked awful, and the gameplay wasn't much better. One character, Brocken Jr, was even banned from the American version of the title for having a finisher called the 'Nazi Gas Attack'. Yeah.



1986: PRO WRESTLING

■ JUST MONTHS before Nintendo released its own *Pro Wrestling*, Sega put out this tag-teamer for the Sega Master System. Featuring usable steel chairs, entrances with music, aerial moves from the top rope, and even a heel/face dynamic that would determine who could use said chairs and aerial moves, this *Pro Wrestling* was pretty solid.



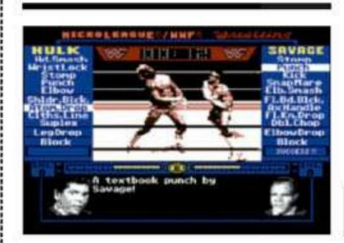
1986: PRO WRESTLING

■ UNFORTUNATELY FOR Sega, Nintendo's *Pro Wrestling* became the more successful of the two titles, and one of the most beloved games ever released for home consoles.

While often cheap and nowhere near perfect, *Pro Wrestling* had a lovable roster of fighters, each with their own moves and personal styles. The single-player mode saw players on a quest to win the Video Wrestling Association championship belt, and then defend it until they could defeat the absurdly difficult Great Puma, and become the VWA/ VWF (Video Wrestling Federation) interpromotional champ. Once they did that, they were treated to the hilarious and now-infamous 'A winner is you!' victory screen, which was certainly the result of some translator on Nintendo's staff being unqualified for the job.

An in-ring referee would monitor the action, running to combatants when a pinfall was occurring and counting them out whenever they would leave the ring. There was even a little cameraman filming the action at ringside. Sounds basic today, but this, like most of *Pro Wrestling*, was mind-blowing stuff 26 years ago.

> "IT SOUNDS BASIC TODAY, BUT MOST OF PRO WRESTLING, WAS MIND-BLOWING 26 YEARS AGO"



1987: MICROLEAGUE WRESTLING

■ THE WORLD Wrestling Federation's first officially licensed game was this turn-based strategy title for the C64 and Atari ST. Yes, we said turn-based strategy. There were only two matches – Hulk Hogan vs Randy Savage on one side of the disk, and Hogan vs 'Mr Wonderful' Paul Orndorff on the other – and the whole game consisted of watching distorted digital stills change based on how your menu-controlled matches progressed, so there wasn't much to actually do. It was also hard as hell. But it did feature backstage interviews with 'Mean' Gene Okerlund, ring introductions by longtime ring announcer Howard Finkel, and even text-based play-by-play commentary.



1988: THE MAIN EVENT

■ ONE OF the better arcade titles to arrive during this period was *The Main Event*, a simplistic yet fun effort from Konami. It had a fully voiced commentator, wonderful graphics for its time, and three separate weight classes, each of which came with their own moves. Unfortunately, since it also featured blatant rip-offs of then-WWF superstars, it was largely taken out of circulation due to copyright infringement.



1989: WWF WRESTLEMANIA

■ POSSIBLY THE earliest example of a wrestling promotion using a videogame to hype up its in-ring product, Rare's *WWF WrestleMania* was released for the NES just weeks before WrestleMania V. The game itself wasn't anything special, with its limited number of moves and average looks. However, it brought an authentic WWF experience to a massively popular home console, which made it the biggest-selling wrestling game on the market. And as any wrestling fan knows, if the crowd likes you, you're going to get pushed eventually.



1989: FIRE PRO WRESTLING (SERIES)

■ WHILE WESTERNERS began their love affair with WWF games, Japan received the first entry in a series that would go on to be its most revered wrestling franchise: *Fire Pro Wrestling*. Beginning with 1989's *Fire Pro Wrestling Combination Tag* for the PC, developer Human Entertainment would release a whopping 17 *FPW*-related titles over the course of the next decade. It then passed the series over to Spike, which

Wrestling All-Stars

The greatest appearances of ten legendary bruisers and mat technicians

HULK HOGAN
(WWF SUPER WRESTLEMANIA)

■ Hulkamania was still running wild in 1992, when the immortal Hulk Hogan gritted his teeth on the cover of *WWF Super WrestleMania*. Hulk's leg drop was deadlier than ever in this one – our guess is that he took an extra dose of vitamins that day.

ANDRE THE GIANT
(WWF WRESTLEMANIA)

■ Hogan's one-time rival and all-around colossus Andre the Giant was never one to mess with, but back in the days of *WWF WrestleMania* for the NES, those club-like fists of his could take players out in just a few swings.

OWEN HART
(WWF RAW)

■ The late, great, and under-utilised Owen Hart made his gaming debut in *WWF Raw*, where he could wholly outwrestle any and all takers. No goofy Blue Blazer gimmick here – Hart was all business.

ROAD WARRIORS
(WCW WRESTLING)

■ *WCW Wrestling* may not have been the best game, but it did feature one of the most prolific tag teams of all time on its cover: the Road Warriors. Hawk and Animal were difficult on their own, but teaming them together created quite the challenge.

UNDERTAKER
(WWF WRESTLEMANIA: THE ARCADE GAME)

■ The Undertaker has been a staple in WWE wrestling games for over two decades. Never was he goofier than in Midway's arcade title, though, which saw the Phenom punch, kick… and summon otherworldly spirits. Seriously.

GOLDBERG
(WCW/NWO REVENGE)

■ The breakout star of the famed Monday Night Wars had to be Bill Goldberg, a no-nonsense powerhouse who simply couldn't be beat. He broke out virtually in *WCW/nWo Revenge*, where he had two devastating finishers: the high-impact Jackhammer, and the bulldozing Spear.

JAKE 'THE SNAKE' ROBERTS
(WWF WRESTLEFEST)

■ The python-sporting legend was at the top of his game around the time *WWF WrestleFest* hit arcades, making him a popular choice for many players. With a variety of suplexes, throws and of course, his patented DDT, such a decision only made sense.

REY MYSTERIO
(WCW VS NWO: WORLD TOUR)

■ One advantage the WCW always had over its competition was a killer cruiserweight division, and no high-flyer has gone on to achieve more success than Rey Mysterio. The masked man had a Spider-Man-style look in *World Tour*, which fit well with his array of high-speed acrobatics.

THE ROCK
(WWF WRESTLEMANIA 2000)

■ We could all smell what The Rock was cooking around the turn of the century, when *WWF WrestleMania 2000* brought the Attitude Era to the N64. From the People's Elbow to the People's Eyebrow, The Rock was perhaps the most fun to use and to watch in the game.

STONE COLD STEVE AUSTIN
(WWF NO MERCY)

■ We can only pair the most beloved wrestler of all time with what's probably the most beloved wrestling game of all time. Drinking beers, flipping birds, and stomping a mudhole in the opponent's chest was never more thrilling than it was in *No Mercy*, and that's the bottom line.

has since made another 11 entries of its own.

Of course, a franchise doesn't get that many releases across virtually every major system without being damn good. *FPW*'s cartoony 2D sprites may look goofy at first, but they play like a purist's dream. Button-mashers need not apply here; these games are reliant on a given player's skill and expert timing, making them extra satisfying whenever you pull out a big win.

Unlike most Western wrestling titles, the *FPW* games have never been beholden to one particular promotion either. While they aren't officially licensed, entries usually include massive rosters that feature all the various styles of pro wrestling across the world, from American brawling to Japanese puroresu and everything in between. Later games would add extensive creator features too, effectively allowing fans to create fantasy matches whenever they like.

Put this all together and you have one of the most critically and commercially acclaimed wrestling franchises in the world.

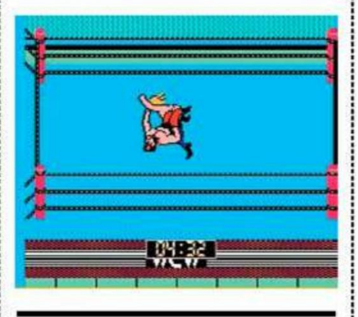


1989: TECMO WORLD WRESTLING

TECMO'S FIRST and only wrestling game was good but not great. You could only choose from ten unlicensed wrestlers, though you could rename them as you saw fit, but it played smoothly, allowed you to reverse moves, and featured extensive text play-by-play commentary.

1990: WCW WRESTLING

WWF'S RIVAL promotion, World Championship Wrestling, got its start in the gaming business with this uninspired effort for the NES. And when we say uninspired, we really mean it – *WCW Wrestling* was actually just a recoated port of *Super Star Pro Wrestling*, which was released in Japan a year earlier and had nothing to do with WCW. It wasn't bad per se, but it didn't have that authentic feel so necessary to a wrestling game's success.



1991: WWF WRESTLEFEST

TECHNOS JAPAN'S latest arcade effort surpassed its already-solid predecessor, 1989's *WWF Superstars*, in nearly every way. It looked gorgeous; expanded its roster to include the likes of Mr Perfect, Sgt Slaughter and others; featured numerous double team moves; and even added cage matches and the Royal Rumble. More importantly, wrestlers started to actually play like themselves. Andre the Giant couldn't be lifted by just anybody, for example, and only wrestlers who used submission moves in reality would be able to use such moves in the game.

It all seemed to click, and fans loved it so much that a modernised remake was released for iOS this year. Sadly, though, this would be one of Technos' last great games, as the company soon hit a financial rut that lasted until it filed for bankruptcy in 1996.



1993: WWF ROYAL RUMBLE

BESIDES *WRESTLEFEST*, most other WWF titles released during this time were mediocre. Games like *WWF WrestleMania Challenge*, *WWF WrestleMania: Steel Cage Challenge*, *WWF Rampage European Tour* and *WWF King Of The Ring* were fine, but forgotten soon enough.

There were bright spots, though, found in a trio of 16-bit games from publisher LJN and developer Sculptured Software. *WWF Royal Rumble* for the Super Nintendo and Sega Mega Drive was the second of these three after 1992's *WWF Super WrestleMania*, and it was simply fantastic.

"HUMAN RELEASED A WHOPPING 17 FIRE PRO WRESTLING TITLES OVER THE COURSE OF THE NEXT DECADE"

BEHIND THE SCENES: TOTAL EXTREME WRESTLING

Indie developer Adam Ryland discusses the unusual Extreme Wrestling series, which adapts the world of tights and testosterone into text adventures and card games



Card games and text adventures are hardly what you'd associate with wrestling games. Why did you decide on those genres with the *Extreme Wrestling* series?

The current state of the market and what other companies were doing didn't factor into the decision at all. The original game was written for me and a few friends because we enjoyed management-style games; there was never any intent for it to reach a wider audience than that.

It's apparent that there's a deep love of wrestling ingrained within *EW*. When did you first become a fan of the sport, and how do you go about taking that passion and translating it to a text-based format?

I became a fan of wrestling around 1992-1993, but as I didn't have access to live content I was mostly catching up by watching videos from the previous decade, so most of my influences are from the original Hulkamania period. The original *Extreme Warfare* games weren't really about translating any sort of passion for the business as I was still only a casual fan at that point; it just happened to be a happy coincidence that I was becoming interested in it at the same time as computer programming and management simulations, so they all fit together.

How do you balance creating an accurate booking sim, and the massive amount of detail that requires, with making

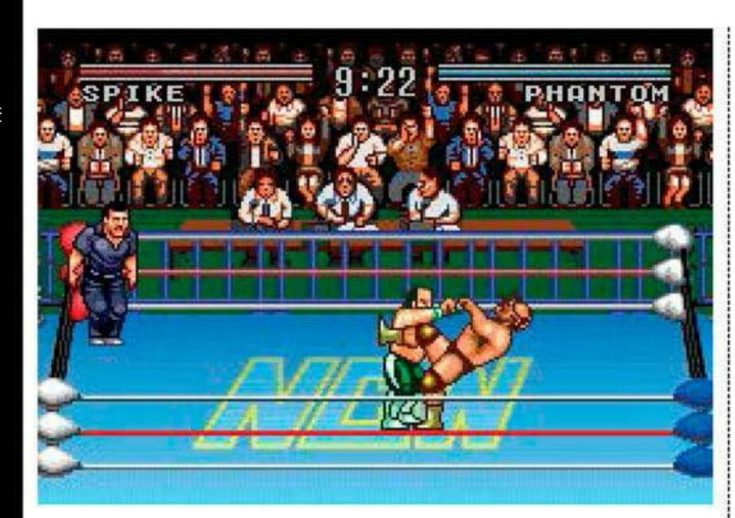
it accessible enough to accommodate newcomers?
That's an ongoing balancing act. The phrase 'you can't please all of the people all of the time' springs to mind, as some people were complaining about the complexity of the games back when I first started, with the extremely simple games, let alone with the much deeper and powerful *TEW* series.

How much research of the more 'backstage' aspects of wrestling did you need to do to make *EW*?
There wasn't really any specific effort to do research; I'm a big reader and have devoured piles upon piles of wrestling autobiographies and magazines over the years, so I've picked up most of what I need as a by-product of that. It's more a combination of having a good memory and an eye for detail than actively seeking out features to put in.

Where do you want to take the series in the future?
The latest game in the series, *TEW 2013*, is coming out near Christmas this year, so that is the next step. Then I will take a break for a month or two to recharge before deciding upon my next step.

Okay, you're suddenly in the CornellVerse. What's your gimmick, entrance music and finisher?
I wouldn't have any. I'd be backstage writing the show!





1993: ZEN-NIPPON PRO WRESTLING (SERIES)

Perhaps the most noteworthy Japan-only alternative to the *Fire Pro Wrestling* franchise, Natsume's *Zen-Nippon Pro Wrestling* series was based on the wildly popular All Japan Pro Wrestling promotion. The developer put out five separate *Zen-Nippon* titles in the span of two years. They weren't as groundbreaking as *FPW*, but they were still solid in their own right, with wrestler-specific move sets and a heaping of game modes. Only the second of these five, *Zen-Nippon Pro Wrestling Dash: Sekai Saikyou Tag*, was released overseas, where it went by the name of *Natsume Championship Wrestling*.

While no longer technically related to Natsume's series, the *Zen-Nippon* name would later migrate over to *FPW* developer Human for a couple of games, before landing in the hands of Sega, which then produced a multitude of titles generally using the All Japan Pro Wrestling licence. The best of these was undoubtedly the Dreamcast's *Giant Gram 2000: All Japan Pro Wrestling 3*, a painstakingly realistic Japan-only sim developed by Scarab that quite a few hardcore fans consider one of the best in the genre's history.

Gameplay was fluid and varied, providing a host of new standard and signature moves in a new 'tug of war' grappling system. It let players tap into their inner heel by featuring eye rakes and the ability to choke out opponents when the ref wasn't looking. Both tag and triple-tag matches were available alongside one-on-one bouts and the Royal Rumble. Each version had a bit of collector's value too, since they came loaded with separate rosters. Overall, *WWF Royal Rumble* looked slick, felt great, and crushed its competition. A sequel, *WWF Raw*, was published with Acclaim a year later, upgraded virtually everything, and solidified the WWF's championship reign.



1993: SATURDAY NIGHT SLAM MASTERS

WE'D BE remiss not to mention *Saturday Night Slam Masters*, one of the last great arcade wrestling games. Capcom's 2D battler worked like a mixture of *WrestleFest* and *Street Fighter II*, with all the awesomeness you'd expect from such a combo. If nothing else, it deserves recognition for featuring *Final Fight*'s Mike Haggar, and for having the most masculine Japanese title of all time: *Muscle Bomber: The Body Explosion*.



1995: WWF WRESTLEMANIA: THE ARCADE GAME

MIDWAY TOOK a stab at wrestling success in 1995, releasing this weird yet enjoyable 2D fighter that looked and played like the developer's own *Mortal Kombat*. Ports came to all home consoles, and soon everyone could make Doink shock enemies with a hand buzzer. The goofy *WWF: In Your House* followed up a year later, which again played like a lesser *Mortal Kombat* but oddly featured awkward non-arena settings like the Hart Dungeon and the Undertaker's Crypt.



1995: EXTREME WARFARE (SERIES)

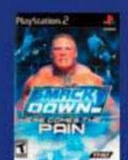
British programmer Adam Ryland's *Extreme Warfare* (later *Total Extreme Wrestling*) series is for those who are more Paul Heyman than Paul Orndorff. The text simulator, which now spans eight games, lets players run their own promotions through careful tactics and shrewd management decisions. In a word: addictive.

1995: TOUKON RETSUDEN (SERIES)

PRIMARILY BASED on New Japan Pro Wrestling, the *Toukon Retsuden* series for the PlayStation and Dreamcast isn't amazing gameplay-wise, but deserves recognition for a couple of reasons. It's one of the first series to go fully 3D, and it was also developed by Yuke's, which would eventually work on a little

BEST OF THE REST

Ten recent titles for wrestling fans to bodyslam



WWE SMACKDOWN! HERE COMES THE PAIN
■ The final *SmackDown!* game wisely toned down the arcadey aspects of previous entries, opting for a more balanced approach. It also introduced the Bra & Panties match, but we don't have to talk about that here.



DEF JAM: FIGHT FOR NY
■ While technically a fighting game, the second *Def Jam* title was certainly influenced by its wrestling counterparts. It featured a lengthy roster of hip-hop celebrities, tight controls, and, of course, a killer soundtrack.



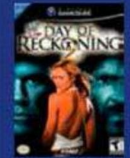
KING OF COLOSSEUM II
■ Grab an import of Spike's 3D successor to the *Fire Pro Wrestling* series if you can, because *King Of Colosseum II* featured a bevy of Japan's best wrestlers and a marvellous grappling system.



FIRE PRO WRESTLING RETURNS
■ Many consider *FPW Returns* to be one of the best wrestlers ever, and with good reason: it was absurdly deep on all fronts, and it impressively modernised the franchise's already-stellar formula.



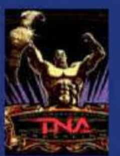
WWE SMACKDOWN VS RAW 2006
■ The best of the *SvR* games had solid online play and a great season mode, along with some much-needed refinements to Yuke's' signature brand of gameplay.



WWE DAY OF RECKONING 2
■ Yuke's' contribution to the GameCube had a superb story mode with branching paths alongside more complex and tactical in-ring action.



WRESTLE KINGDOM 2: PRO WRESTLING SEKAI TAISEN
■ Yet another Japan-only experience, *Wrestle Kingdom 2* was bare bones but contained a heaping of unlockables and extras, including interviews with its legend-filled roster.



TNA WRESTLING
■ This turn-based iOS title was perhaps the only positive contribution TNA ever made to gaming. Unfortunately, it's no longer available to download, having been replaced by the lesser *TNA Wrestling iMPACT!*.



TOTAL EXTREME WRESTLING 2010
■ The latest version of Adam Ryland's addictive text-based simulator let fans live out their wildest Mr McMahon fantasies and run their own promotions – minus the steroid allegations, of course.



WWE ALL STARS
■ A refreshing and fun change of pace from the incessant realism of today's wrestling games, *WWE All Stars* saw both past and present superstars brawl in the most gloriously over-the-top way.



series called *WWF SmackDown!*. Westerners may recognise 1996's *Power Move Pro Wrestling*, based on the first *Toukon Retsuden*.

1997: WCW VS NWO: WORLD TOUR

■ Despite its rise in real-life popularity, WCW had been mired in a sea of digital mediocrity. All that changed with this, from THQ and AKI. It debuted AKI's revolutionary grappling system, resulting in a 3D title where wrestling felt more natural. Health bars were replaced by Spirit gauges that rewarded players for gaining momentum.

It wasn't perfect, with weak presentation that felt more Japanese than WCW, but players approved, making *World Tour* the highest-selling wrestling game for the N64 at the time.



1998: WWF WAR ZONE

■ NOT TO be outdone, the WWF jumped into the 3D scene with Acclaim's *WWF War Zone*. It brought plenty of good things to the table like a responsive crowd, but post-*World Tour*, *War Zone*'s button combos were old hat. Acclaim's last WWF title, *WWF Attitude*, suffered a similar fate.





1998: WCW/NWO REVENGE

TAKE *WCW vs nWo: World Tour*. Improve everything. You now have *WCW/nWo Revenge*. It looked better, played tighter, and added new moves, real-life arenas, a combo system, ring entrances, a ref, managers and valets, championship belts, factions, and the best roster in a Western wrestling game to date.

In fact, it was so sublime that the WWF would counter by snatching up a deal with THQ and AKI itself, leading WCW to side with EA. That relationship would result in the okay *WCW Mayhem* in 1999, and the awful *WCW Backstage Assault* in 2000. The damage was done, and the WWF bought out its long-term rival a year later.



1998: ALL JAPAN WOMEN'S PRO WRESTLING

A QUICK shout out to the ladies of wrestling, who have been relegated to drooling dudes and *Playboy* covers more often than is fair over the years. Titles like *All Japan Women's Pro Wrestling* for the PSone took the fairer sex seriously, though, sporting a tight grappling system and attractive graphics. It's another Japan-only affair, though, so good luck getting your hands on it today.



1999: WWF WRESTLEMANIA 2000

THQ CONTINUED to fine tune things with *WrestleMania 2000*, its WWF debut. A detailed create-a-wrestler and an extensive career



mode were the newest features, but the main draw was still AKI's butter-smooth gameplay. Well, that, and the ability to flip people off with Stone Cold.

2000: ECW HARDCORE REVOLUTION

AFTER LOSING the WWF licence, Acclaim moved on to the smaller but wildly popular Extreme Championship Wrestling.



"MANY WILL SWEAR BY WWF NO MERCY AS THE GREATEST WRESTLING GAME EVER MADE"

Everything about the relationship failed. *Hardcore Revolution* and its follow-up, *Anarchy Rulz*, were bland, lacking the energy that made ECW so successful.

ECW, like WCW, was purchased by the WWF in 2001. Acclaim would try to rebound with *Legends Of Wrestling* in 2001, but that bombed too, and Acclaim folded in 2004.



2000: WWF SMACKDOWN! (SERIES)

YUKE'S' PSONE juggernaut began in 2000 and took off immediately. Action was fast and arcade-like, eschewing complex grappling for button combos. It looked amazing, with detailed backstage areas, and the story mode could be played for hours. It carried this name until rebranding as *SmackDown vs Raw* in 2004, and then simply *WWE* in 2011.

2000: WWF NO MERCY

MANY WILL swear by *No Mercy* as the greatest wrestling game ever. That may not be entirely true, but it's hard to find many faults.

No Mercy was more or less the perfection of the formula started with *World Tour*. The story and create modes were at their most extensive, ladder matches arrived, entrances came with authentic music, and each wrestler acted like their real-life self.

It has that nostalgia factor – fans play it and instantly feel like they are back in the Attitude Era again. You can't put a value on it.



2000: ALL STAR PRO-WRESTLING (SERIES)

WE CLOSE our journey with Square's Japan-exclusive PS2 game. It looked superb, but its dual-analogue controls played, well, like they came from an RPG developer instead of a wrestling game one. *All Star Pro-Wrestling II* would rectify the issues somewhat, and a third game would further the efforts, but the franchise never reached the great highs typical of the *Final Fantasy* creator.



ESSENTIALS

10 OVERUSED PLOT DEVICES

We've rescued the sweet princess from her castle incarceration, battled through WWII, Vietnam and Afghanistan, and even found time to become the underworld kingpin. We've done these things time and time again, with many an adventure deficient in inventiveness or variety. There's no question that writing a compelling narrative is hard work, but these overused plot devices remain so trite that they make Dan Brown look like Philip K Dick.

1


3


4

2


5


6


The apocalypse
Examples: Modern Warfare 2, Mass Effect

1 It's the end of the world as we know it, or at least that always seems to be the case. Developers to date haven't managed to top the immediate consequence and emotional resonance associated with a good old-fashioned Biblical apocalypse, so it's been used as a hoary base coat for the majority of videogame narratives ever since the medium's inception. If we were counting, Earth would be second only to blonde-haired pink princesses when it comes to being completely inept at staying out of trouble.

Window shopping
Examples: Half-Life, Dead Space

2 How could Valve have ever known that *Half-Life* would be responsible for such a frustrating storytelling device: the window. Many a time we've stood gazing nonchalantly through a plate of glass, only for some monumental event to occur on the other side, frustratingly just out of reach. If there's one thing you can guarantee during one of these sequences, it's that any world-ending weapon or power you've accumulated to that point will be rendered inert instantly. Behold the profound scientific miracle that is unbreakable glass.

Good/evil paradigm
Examples: BioShock, Knights Of The Old Republic

3 It's rare for a developer to actually embrace the moral shades of grey that keep the world spinning on a daily basis, rather preferring to categorise players as simply 'good' or 'evil'. Oh, and don't forget that killing a small continent's worth of people doesn't count. No, it's whether you selected 'A' or 'B' at the crucial point that determines whether you'll be lifted to gaming nirvana, or spend an agonising eternity in fiery torment at the lowest depths of hell. Well, that or a slightly alternative ending.

Fetch
Examples: Darksiders, World Of Warcraft

4 In life, you've got to give a little to get a little. Sometimes that involves a simple benevolent gesture or other times it involves something grander. But fetching three ancient artefacts from some mythical cavern before that lumbering oaf lets you pass the door? That's just taking the piss a bit, isn't it? Why they can't just go in there themselves we'll never know, but all too often the world's mightiest hero will be reduced to nothing but a snivelling errand boy.

Sealed evil
Examples: Chrono Trigger, Shining Force

5 Having a puritanical imperative to not kill every wrongdoer in the universe isn't strictly a bad idea, but deciding to seal an ancient evil in some mystical portal for eternity is frankly going to end badly. This one usually ties in to 'The Chosen One' who, through no fault of his/her own, will unwittingly prove to be the catalyst that unleashes the maleficent foe and causes untold destruction on the world. This is why Batman has so many problems.







Amnesia
Examples: Fallout: New Vegas, Final Fantasy VII

6 Who even remembers when this staid trend began? It's obvious why so many developers employ an amnesia-stricken protagonist as a storytelling device: it not only creates an empty vessel for players to inhabit, but also an instantly alluring mystique centred around the game's oh-so integral plot. In other words, it's a shockingly lazy approach to narrative, encouraging the continued investment of many more hours into an adventure that rewards the perseverance of the player with a half-baked plot twist. Here's a tip for developers: stop.

Aliens must die
Examples: Space Invaders, Halo

7 We've been killing aliens for pretty much as long as computer games have been flickering little pixels on our television screens. Perhaps it has become culturally ingrained into the public consciousness that we should automatically greet any invading entity with a friendly payload of metal death, or maybe we're all massively xenophobic. Either way, it's not like game designers have done much to further the cause, preferring to paint extraterrestrial bellies a luminous shade of orange than actually develop these otherworldly species in a meaningful way.

The Chosen One
Example: The Legend Of Zelda, Prince Of Persia

8 Congratulations! It turns out you were the Chosen One all along – now run along and save the world like a good little messiah. Far too often it's not enough for a videogame hero to be, you know, human; there has to be a greater destiny that ties intrinsically to the fate of the universe. But just as quickly as you can roar 'Fus Ro Dah', you can lose the tangible investment between the player and the character. Gordon Freeman didn't need manifest destiny, just a crowbar.

Distracting characterisation
Example: Grand Theft Auto IV, Shenmue

9 We do not want to go for a drink. We do not want to go bowling. We do not want to go play darts. We most certainly do not want to hit the gym. If we wanted to do any of these things, we would, most likely, not be playing a videogame. That is unless it's a videogame designed specifically around one of those activities. There's no better way to undercut the urgency of your narrative than to populate your story with such length-padding inanity.

The hero loses everything
Examples: Zelda: The Wind Waker, Metroid

10 You can imagine the thought process of the developer struggling to add some mid-game tension. "How can we make the character vulnerable towards the end of the game?" Dev 1 would quizzically ask. "Why don't we remove all the player's weapons and powers, basically diminishing all of the skills they've accumulated up until that point?" drivels Dev 2. Yeah, that'll work. While the logic is sound – the sole purpose being to emphasise the dire circumstances surrounding the protagonist – what it in fact does is subject the player to such frustrating tedium that you undermine every achievement to that point.


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So beautiful you'll want to live there.





Five things Mists Of Pandaria gets right

THINK YOU'RE DONE WITH WORLD OF WARCRAFT? YOU'RE NOT. THIS LATEST EXPANSION STILL HAS PLENTY TO OFFER

1 Pandaren

YOU ASKED for them and now you've got them. The good news is Blizzard has found a very comfortable balance between cute and callous. As you traipse through Pandaria, cubs tug at your heels in awe of your legacy, boasting to each other that you can kick a bridge down with the ball of your foot or control the very winds that drift through the world. One thing is true from the very beginning of *Mists Of Pandaria*: legend is everything.

Then there's the wise old sages that offer pearls of wisdom to guide you down your chosen path, whether that eventually leads to Alliance or Horde. Blizzard even has war-torn, rough-around-the-edges Pandaren roaming the massive world, with deep, angry eyes, ferocious war wounds and vile disfigurements.

As a race, the Pandaren have a rich, intricate lore that naturally weaves into the world of *Warcraft*. You'll feel compelled to read every text box, and engage with every story. The fan service borders on perfection, with even the racial attributes feeling wholly appropriate. It's hard to believe that players won't come away from *Mists Of Pandaria* with a smile on their face.

INFORMATION

FORMAT:
Mac, PC
PUBLISHER:
Blizzard
DEVELOPER:
In-house
ORIGIN:
US

2 The Isle of Pandaria

A RACE could have the most interesting history ever recorded, but if the surroundings aren't attractive to the eye, nobody is going to care. Fortunately, Pandaria is utterly glorious.

Warcraft has dazzled its audiences with panoramic views and amazing attention to detail for seven years, but the game has never looked this good.

From Krasarang Wilds to the Jade Forest, your eyes will gleam with delight no matter where you are.

There's so much magic and mysticism swirling the island of Pandaria, whether you're walking on water, engaging in trials to take you past the initial stages of your training, or talking to Shen-Zin Su, a giant floating turtle making more than a passing reference to Great A'Tuin from Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*.

After scorching the world, ripping it apart at the seams, Blizzard has recognised that players just want to explore and has created a most wonderful playground for them to do just that.

3 Pet Battles

WHEN YOU reach level 5, pet trainers scattered all over the world will teach you the Pet Battles ability, providing you've got a fair bit of gold to spare. You'll also be able to purchase starter pets and even an ability to tame wild creatures to take into the arena.

Pets start out with the most basic abilities, but they'll gain levels by defeating wild creatures, enabling them to grow stronger and learn new skills all the time.

Unlike the real-time warfare on battlegrounds or in player duels, pet battles are turn-based affairs, making them much more familiar and accessible to those who love *Pokémon*.

Interestingly, weather can also impact the battle. When it's dark, it's harder for pets to see, and if there's sun, the maximum health of pets is increased.

This game within a game will lead to more lost hours than ever in *WOW*. Whether you're just having a bit of fun between friends or fighting someone else in your realm, pet battles are one of the best additions to the series in years. The potential to take this further presents some exciting possibilities. It will be very interesting to see where Blizzard takes it next.

"It's hard to believe that players won't come away from Mists Of Pandaria with a smile on their face"



The calm of the wind helps train your chi.



The monk class is an excellent addition.

4 Challenge Mode

YOU THOUGHT Heroics were tough? Well your favourite dungeons are about to get a whole lot harder. Challenge mode adds a new dimension to many of the places you've visited a hundred times, and finally gives you the chance to go at it with other players for bragging rights.

Players enter dungeons with standard gear, and the aim is to run through the instance as quickly as possible, fighting through all the enemies along the way. It's clear that with this expansion, Blizzard isn't just trying to pander to new players getting into *WOW*; it's also catering to the core.

The time taken to complete the instance, as well as the quantity of bonus points, grades your team's performance with a bronze, silver or gold medal.

Instead of loot dropping from each individual enemy, your rewards are claimed at the end of the dungeon, depending on how well you perform. Players will also be rewarded with Valor Points, mounts, titles and even specialised gear.

Challenge mode breathes new life into existing *World Of Warcraft* content, making things much more interesting for everyone, and is definitely something that *Mists Of Pandaria* gets very right.

5 The Monk Class

THE MONK class is a new, well-balanced addition to the game, capable of fulfilling a number of roles such as healing and tanking. At the heart of those abilities is chi. This works in harmony with mana and energy, and is built up when the monk uses basic attacks. When the chi bar is filled, the monk can attack his opponents with a lethal, finishing blow.

Monks are clad in leather armour, making them extremely nimble and dexterous in battle. While not as swift as the rogue, the monk is proficient at both PVE and PVP.

Monks fall somewhere between a druid and a rogue in terms of damage output and general abilities. They make effective tanks with their health increments, damage over time and damage reduction, but are also a multitasking, hands-on healer that can deal melee damage while still delivering health regeneration to the rest of the party.

Another unique feature of the monk class is weapon attunement. This allows the monk to become more accustomed to a weapon than any other class, increasing the player's damage output with it, whether they're choosing to dual-wield or handle a two-handed weapon.

This is a class to be reckoned with.

MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

MARVEL HEROES DONS THE CLOSED BETA SPANDEX



Another free-to-play MMO is one step closer to launch as *Marvel Heroes* finally gets a closed beta. Headed up by former *Diablo* developer David Brevik, *Marvel Heroes* is a loot-'em-up, beat-'em-up, comic book geek's dream come true. It's not done yet, though. Gazillion Entertainment has made it clear that this beta version won't be indicative of the finished product.

KICKSTARTING A NEW GENERATION OF MMOS



Who wasn't expecting this? *Project: Gorgon*, conceptualised by veterans responsible for *Star Trek Online* and *EverQuest II*, has appeared on Kickstarter, seeking $55,000 in funding. No word on if this will be subscription-based or free-to-play, but it's intended to be a "thoroughly modern MMO" with a "quirky, old-school feel".

MISTS OF PANDARIA PROVES WOW ISN'T GOING ANYWHERE



Despite mounting speculation, Blizzard has released the first week sales for *Mists Of Pandaria*: it shifted 2.7 million copies in the first week, and that doesn't even include China. The company has also announced that its global user base has grown from 10 million subscribers. Basically, it ain't dead yet!

BETHESDA HAS A NEW BATTLE CRY, AND IT COULD BE AN MMO

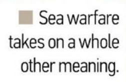


Bethesda has set up Battlecry Studios in Austin, Texas, and hired *The Old Republic* veteran Rich Vogel from BioWare. Vogel also worked on *Star Wars Galaxies* and *Ultima Online*. The studio's first project is as yet unannounced.



Expect an MMO of epic proportions.





Sea warfare takes on a whole other meaning.







The backdrops are jaw-dropping.

World Of Warplanes

THE COMBINATION OF WARPLANES AND MMOS IS A DREAM COME TRUE FOR SOME. HAS IT BEEN WORTH THE WAIT?

First it was tanks, and now it's warplanes. Wargaming.net clearly wants to cater to all demographics, and with this latest airborne adventure it's definitely on the right course.

World Of Warplanes is the perfect way for flight sim fans to break into the MMO genre. It incorporates every established element and embeds multiple players and familiar mechanics into a similar framework to *World Of Tanks*.

Initially, you'll start out by gliding through targets, and firing on stationary blimps as a training exercise. However, as your competency as a captain of the skies soars, you'll be able to go head-to-head with other fighters and drop bombs on their territories below.

By fulfilling set criteria and proving your merit in battle, you'll earn experience points and in-game currency to spend on researching and developing your fleet within the game's virtual hangar. Different plane types will be available to purchase, such as heavy fighters and ground-attack craft. Under these headings, planes vary in size, stature and competency; whether you prefer resilient, durable planes, or ones with a better fire spread and improved air dexterity. Varying bullet types can also be equipped to planes, although the full level of customisation has yet to be determined as the game is still in closed beta.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Wargaming.net**
DEVELOPER: **In-house**
ORIGIN: **Belarus**
RELEASE: **TBA**
PRICE: **Free**

///**The game** examines several periods in warplane history, dating as far back as the Thirties up to early jet fighters. The catalogue of craft emanates from various countries including the USA, Germany and Russia, so aficionados will feel comfortable from the outset.

Control can be handled perfectly well with the mouse and keyboard, although purists may prefer the immersion of a flight stick, which *World Of Warplanes* fully endorses. It allows players to use simplified and expert control, and while newcomers might be startled by the sensitivity of the mouse control, once adjusted, they'll soon become a dab hand.

The bulk of the game is focused around air battles, which last 15 minutes, and the objective is to defeat all members of the opposing team, or wipe out all of their ground fortifications. Experience is earned by defeating enemies, blowing buildings apart, maintaining accuracy of fire, and minimising damage taken.

However, choice of aircraft isn't the only deciding factor in winning a war. Weather also has an important role to play. For example, if there are extreme winds, the plane will be tossed about from side to side, making navigation extremely difficult.

World Of Warplanes is an elegant title. Without question, PCs will be melting when the game is turned up full blast. It's very easy to put the game up there with the most beautiful and detailed MMOs. Quite amazing when you consider that it is still actively in development.

There's no word on when the game will officially launch, but with planes from different countries, connectivity with *World Of Tanks*, and clan battles expected in the future, it's fair to say, based on our early impressions, that Wargaming.net has got a real high-flier on its hands.





Chris Whiteside

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today

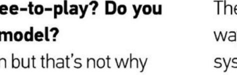
Guild Wars 2 has been a resounding success for NCsoft. In this exclusive interview, Chris Whiteside tells us what that means to the studio, how it's going to evolve the brand, and if MMOs really can work on home consoles

Was the resounding success of *Guild Wars 2* a surprise to you?
We exceeded the community's expectations and are flattered by the uptake of sales. It's great for the community and it's great for the team. Now we have to work even harder to raise the bar.

How different will *Guild Wars 2* be six months to a year from now?
We see *Guild Wars 2* as a world and platform. We want to evolve and innovate where we can, not just build on what works. Very soon you'll see awesome new stuff. There's no rest for the wicked.

How important has fan feedback been to the game's direction? What have you learned?
We need more sleep! We've learned more about security importance and developing our endgame. We've worked hard to get out all the kinks since launch. If anything, maybe we're too focused on community feedback.

> We want to evolve and innovate where we can, not just build on what works. Very soon you'll see awesome new stuff

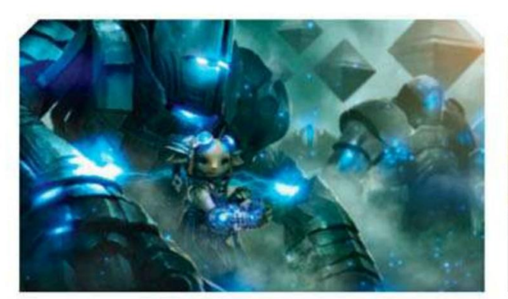


Do you regret the decision to go free-to-play? Do you believe it's the future of the MMO model?
The market is evolving in that direction but that's not why *Guild Wars 2* is F2P. *Guild Wars 2* presents a win/win situation for everyone, as there's no false pressure on the player to keep playing. We're concentrating on what makes the game fun, and what will keep them playing. We feel it's the fairest model for our community.

How do you stay relevant and remain attractive to the mass market?
We believe in giving players something to sink their teeth into. We'll keep putting more emphasis on lore to make different components more meaningful. As long as we have our core pillars, and know our basic direction, who knows where we're going to go? It's exciting.

Is the MMO market thriving or shrinking? Where does it need to evolve?
MMOs are stable in their massive competitiveness. Ultimately, the community decides whether these worlds live or die. There isn't an online world without a population. We're in a comfortable position, as we are pioneering and pushing forward, but we also have to discuss our considerations in terms of risk. The next revolution is going to be tied into hardware, what you play, how you access things and how you immerse yourself in the world.

With the next generation imminent, will we finally have consoles that'll do MMOs justice?
There are challenges in terms of control, but there are ways around that. Consoles tend to be living-room-based systems, so some of the immersion may be lost. There's a huge opportunity in that space to be successful, but to be relevant and successful in that market, you need to develop a title from the ground up. There's an amazing experience waiting to happen, but it would require a monumental task to get it right.





Guild Wars 2 was so popular at launch that NCsoft briefly stopped selling it until server capacity could keep up. Take note, Blizzard.



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